

Response provided to journalist 26 August 2016

Questions:

When was the fire fighting foam used at the Townsville Airport and the RAAF Base, if it was used at all?

Is there any information/ update from the draft report into traces of PFAS in the groundwater at the RAAF Base Townsville?

If so, are there processes in place to consult with the local community?

Should residents be cautious of drinking bore water until the tests are complete?

Response to all:

In 2003 Defence became aware that Perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) and Perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) were emerging contaminants. From 2004 Defence commenced transitioning from the legacy fire-fighting foam to a new product that has a significantly reduced environmental impact and does not contain PFOS and PFOA as active ingredients.

Defence has been proactive in initiating an environmental program to investigate the extent and levels of PFOS and PFOA on, and in the vicinity of, some of its bases around Australia. As well as a number of detailed environmental site investigations already underway, a preliminary sampling program has also commenced at a number of sites.

Preliminary sampling conducted at RAAF Base Townsville was completed in July 2016. Defence is currently reviewing the draft report of the sampling and is conducting a thorough analysis of the data. The final results of the environmental sampling are expected to be received by Defence later this month. These results will be used to determine whether more detailed environmental investigations need to be undertaken focusing on PFOS and PFOA outside of the base.

Defence will provide the sampling results to Queensland authorities and will engage with the local community on findings of the preliminary investigation in the near future.

Any questions relating to the consumption of bore water should be directed to the Queensland Department of Health.

Background:

Specialised Aqueous film forming foam (AFFF) was used for nearly 50 years across a range of major military bases, civilian aerodromes and industrial facilities around Australia for critical national defence and other purposes to rapidly extinguish liquid fuel fires.

Chemicals in the older fire fighting foams - in particular, Perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) and Perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), PFOS and PFOA - were also used in a range of industrial, commercial and domestic products.

Defence is continuing to work with Commonwealth, State and local authorities to investigate this legacy issue. This issue is not unique to Defence.

Most people living in developed nations will have some level of PFOS and PFOA in their body as these chemicals were also used in common household and industrial applications, such as in the manufacture of non-stick cookware, fabric, furniture and carpet stain protection applications, food packaging and in some industrial processes.

According to the Environmental Health Standing Committee (enHealth) Perfluorinated Chemicals Guidance Statements released on 16 March 2016, there is currently no consistent evidence that exposure to PFOS and PFOA causes adverse human health effects. Because these compounds persist in humans and the environment, enHealth recommends that human exposure is minimised as a precaution.

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The enHealth Guidance Statements are available from the Department of Health at <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-publthpublicat-environ.htm>

Defence has established a national website to facilitate access to information regarding its PFOS and PFOA investigation program:
<http://www.defence.gov.au/id/PFOSPFOA/Default.asp>

Defence has also established a national telephone number: 1800 365 414 and email address:
PFCDefenceCoordination@golder.com.au