

Response provided to journalist
25 November 2016

Questions:

Was wondering if you can advise if the HMAS Stirling fire training ground had been closed in the past following concerns about environmental contamination from PFAS chemicals?

If so when was it closed, for how long, when was it re-opened and what changes have been put in place to clean up any contamination, or is this still to be determined by the environmental investigation?

What effect has the use of these chemical had on personnel using the facility, or is that also to be determined as part of the investigation?

How was this contamination initially discovered and when?

I was wondering if I could get a response from Defence to comments made by Brand MHR Madeleine King in Parliament last week about this issue? Specifically, her claim that: that there are dangerous levels of contamination on the land that hosts thousands of service personnel.

And: The government's code of silence on this contamination issue is unacceptable, utterly disrespectful and shows a total disregard for those committed people that serve the nation from HMAS *Stirling* in Rockingham why has it taken since 2013 for test results to be made public?

Response to all:

The HMAS Stirling fire training ground has not been closed as a result of the per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) environmental investigations.

The health and safety of military and civilian personnel is a primary concern of Defence. Defence understands that a primary pathway for uptake into the body is from drinking water containing these compounds. This exposure pathway is avoided by personnel at HMAS Stirling as the base operates on reticulated town water.

Defence has been proactive in initiating an environmental program to investigate and implement a comprehensive approach to manage the impacts of PFAS on, and in the vicinity of, some of its bases around Australia.

As well as a number of detailed environmental investigations already underway, Defence has undertaken a preliminary sampling program at a number of sites including HMAS Stirling. The preliminary sampling program report was finalised in September 2016. The report then underwent a quality assurance review by an independent environmental consultant before being provided to the relevant state and local authorities for consultation in October. The report was publicly released on 8 November 2016 via Defence's National PFAS Investigation and Management Program.

Based on the outcome of this preliminary sampling program it has been determined that HMAS Stirling will be subject to a detailed environmental investigation.

The detailed environmental investigation will determine the nature and extent of PFAS on, and in the vicinity of, the base. The investigation will commence in 2017 and will take approximately 12 months to complete. Specific dates will be advised once Defence has consulted with relevant federal, state/territory and local government authorities.

Defence remains committed to being open and transparent with local communities during the investigations. Once further information regarding the detailed environmental investigations are available, Defence will provide this information to the local and state authorities and will engage with the local community at the earliest opportunity.

Further information about the pending investigations can be found at:
<http://www.defence.gov.au/ID/PFOSPFOA/DefenceSitesPending.asp>

Background:

PFAS are a class of manufactured chemicals that have been used since the 1950s to make products that resist heat, stains, grease and water. PFAS are generally present in aqueous

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film forming foam (AFFF). AFFF is a fire-fighting foam that has been used extensively worldwide, and within Australia, from about the 1970s by both civilian and military authorities, due to its effectiveness in extinguishing liquid fuel fires.

Older formulations of AFFF contained a number of PFAS that are now known to be persistent in the environment and in humans. The PFAS of interest include perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS); perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA); and perfluorohexane sulfonate (PFHxS).

As well as firefighting foams, PFAS have had many uses in common household and industrial applications. These include stain resistant applications for furniture and carpets, fast food or packaged food containers, make up, personal care products and cleaning products.

In 2003 Defence became aware that PFOS and PFOA were emerging contaminants. From 2004, Defence transitioned to a new product called Ansilite for use on the Defence estate. The product currently used by Defence has significantly reduced environmental impact and does not contain PFOS and PFOA as active ingredients.

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 and updated on 24 June 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.

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>