

Response provided to journalist
17 October 2016

Questions:

Just met with the town council who have not yet received the draft report on the testing of ground water around Tindal RAAF.

Council said the base commander would be happy to give us info on what waterways were tested? Can we speak with him tomorrow?

Otherwise can we get information on exactly what areas were tested? And did the tests include the Tindal aquifer?

Response:

Defence is not holding interviews at this time. Defence remains committed to being open and transparent and will continue to engage with the Katherine community.

Defence has been proactive in initiating an environmental program to investigate the extent and levels of per- and poly-fluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS), including 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 been undertaken at 12 Defence sites across Australia, including RAAF Base Tindal. The purpose of the preliminary sampling program is to understand if PFAS are present on, or in the vicinity of the base.

Preliminary sampling conducted at RAAF Base Tindal was completed in June 2016. Groundwater and surface water samples were collected on base and in the vicinity of the base. Defence is undertaking a quality assurance review of the draft report for the preliminary sampling program. Once finalised the results will be communicated to the immediate stakeholders, Defence Base personnel, Northern Territory Government, Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority and the Katherine Town Council.

Following those consultations Defence will then release the results and the proposed investigation program to the general public. A date for the public release of the results is not yet available. Defence is working to undertake the consultation as a priority.

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.

In 2003 Defence became aware that this was an emerging contaminant. From 2004, Defence transitioned to a new product called Ansulite 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.

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As well as a number of detailed environmental site investigations already underway, a preliminary sampling program has also commenced at a number of sites.

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 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>

Defence has established a national website to facilitate access to information regarding its PFAS 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