

Response provided to journalist
07 September 2016

Question:

I understand that testing for groundwater contamination at RAAF Base Tindal due to PFOS and PFOA was due to be completed at the end of June. I'm wondering if those tests have been completed, and if I can arrange an interview with a relevant spokesperson to discuss the tests.

Response:

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.

Subject to the outcomes of the preliminary sampling program, a detailed environmental investigation may be undertaken at selected sites. If detailed investigations are undertaken, they will be conducted in accordance with the National Environment Protection (Assessment of Site Contamination) Measure (MEPM) framework. If a detailed investigation program is to be conducted for RAAF Base Tindal, the schedule will be made publically available when finalised.

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 has received the draft report which covers all 12 Defence sites including RAAF Base Tindal. The report is currently being reviewed and is expected to be released this month to the Northern Territory Government, Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority, and the Katherine Town Council for comment and the report will then be released publicly, and could include a community information briefing session. Defence is already in communication with the Northern Territory Government and is also committed to working collaboratively with the Katherine Town Council.

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, 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-pubhlthpublicat-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