

Provided to journalist
3 October 2017

Questions:

Some in the Katherine community in the NT say Defence isn't being clear with information regarding PFAS contamination in the area.

Some say there is a lack of information from Defence and what is being given at community consultations is vague and lacks meaningful detail. They say they are being fobbed off and they want more clarity on the potential health impacts and risks. People are worried about the effects of long-term exposure over the years gone. What is Defence's response to this?

Why won't Defence offer blood tests to people living in the Katherine area despite offering them to those affected in Oakey and Williamtown

Is Defence aware of the impact of the situation on people's mental health and what is it doing about it?

When is the water treatment plant due to arrive?

Answers:

Defence understands community concerns in relation to per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) detections and is committed to working with the relevant authorities, including the Commonwealth Department of Health and Northern Territory Health, to ensure the Katherine community is provided with the most up-to-date information and health advice relating to PFAS.

Defence is committed to providing the community with detailed updates on the environmental investigation into PFAS that is currently underway. Defence has conducted seven community engagement sessions at Katherine to date and has also hosted a stall at the Katherine show.

From 10 –12 October Defence will hold a shopfront at Katherine Oasis. This will provide another opportunity for members of the community to speak with Defence representatives and find out more about the investigation.

The detailed environmental investigation is being conducted in accordance with the National Environmental Protection (Assessment of Site Contamination) Measure 1999 (NEPM). Once the investigation findings are finalised, Defence will provide the results to the local community. Defence will also continue to issue investigation updates to the community via newsletters which can be found at:

<http://www.defence.gov.au/environment/pfas/Tindal/publications.asp>

Defence is not an expert on matters relating to population health and relies on the expertise of the relevant health authorities. When assessing and managing any potential risks to human health posed by PFOS and PFOA, Defence refers to the guidance issued by the Environmental Health Standing Committee (enHealth). The enHealth guidance statements advise there is currently no consistent evidence that

exposure to PFOS and PFOA causes adverse human health effects. However, because these chemicals persist in humans and the environment, enHealth recommends human exposure to these chemicals is minimised as a precaution.

The Voluntary Blood Testing Program is being conducted in conjunction with an epidemiological study and these activities are focused on the Oakey and Williamstown communities because the extent of contamination and the exposure pathways are well understood in these regions. The extent of contamination at other sites, including those in Katherine, is still being determined. The activities at Williamstown and Oakey will contribute to our understanding of the potential health risks associated with PFAS and inform decisions on the potential for similar activities at other sites in the future.

Any further questions regarding the Voluntary Blood Testing Program should be directed to the Commonwealth Department of Health.

The Katherine water treatment plant arrived in Darwin on 25 September. Once the plant has been delivered to Katherine it will commence a commissioning process. It is expected the system will be treating water, as part of the commissioning process, by the end of October 2017 and fully operational shortly after.