

Response Provided to Journalist

23 April 2019

Question

Seeking comment on the April 22 Media Release from the Coalition Against PFAS.

Response

Defence has commenced investigations into the impacts of per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) at 27 locations around Australia, 13 of which have been concluded and progressed to the management stage. These investigations are being undertaken in accordance with the National Environmental Protection Measure for Site Contamination. Defence is committed to responsibly managing the environment in which it operates and manages on behalf of the Australian community and these detailed environmental investigations are a reflection of this commitment.

Defence is committed to minimising the impacts of PFAS contamination and has made the following investments into PFAS management and remediation with the aim of breaking potential PFAS exposure pathways.

- There are four water treatment plants currently in operation across the Defence estate and a further five water treatment plants are expected to be commissioned across the estate in 2019. Defence has treated over 2 billion litres of water through PFAS water treatment plants,
- A soil washing plant is being trialled at Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Base Edinburgh with initial trial results expected in the second quarter of 2019.
- Drain maintenance to reduce PFAS migration was conducted at Oakey and Williamtown with approximately 21,183 tonnes of soil removed to licenced facilities.
- The Fire Training Area at RAAF Base Williamtown has been excavated, removing 6350 cubic metres of contaminated soil from a key source area.
- Town water connections have been completed for residents in Oakey and are ongoing for residents in Williamtown. As at 22 March 2019, a total of 339 town water connections have been completed across the two communities.
- Rain water tanks have been installed at 66 properties in the Katherine region.

In addition to Defence's PFAS remediation measures, Defence is supporting studies and trials to better understand the properties of PFAS and how it can be remediated. Defence has provided up to \$13 million in funding to the Australian Research Council for their Special Research Initiative on PFAS and continues to support the Cooperative Research Centre for Contamination Assessment and Remediation of the Environment. Defence is pioneering treatment approaches to manage and reduce the impact of PFAS contamination within the environment and has funded 10 PFAS research projects valued at approximately \$3.5 million.

The Australian Government's response to PFAS contamination also includes dedicated mental health and counselling services and a voluntary blood testing program for affected communities in Williamstown, Katherine and Oakey. These services are supported by an epidemiological study into potential health effects from exposure to PFAS.

Defence is committed to being open and transparent about its environmental investigations, management and remediation efforts at PFAS-affected Defence bases and in surrounding communities. Defence engages with affected communities on a regular basis. In addition to public community events such as information and walk-in sessions, Defence continues to work with communities through dedicated hotlines, newsletters and one on one meetings. Defence collaborates with State and Territory governments as well as local councils by sharing the results and outcomes of its investigations and enabling relevant agencies to develop and issue advice to local communities. Defence and the Department of Human Services have also appointed community liaison officers at some sites to provide additional community support and link residents with Commonwealth services.

All PFAS-related claims received by Defence are handled on a case-by-case basis in accordance with the Attorney-General's Legal Services Directions 2017 (Cth). Three class actions have been commenced against the Commonwealth in the Federal Court of Australia. The Federal Court has set aside hearing dates, commencing 12 August 2019, to hear these class actions. As these matters are before the Court, it would not be appropriate to comment further.