



**Senator the Hon Marise Payne**  
**Minister for Defence**

Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

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Senator Brian Burston  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Senator Burston

Thank you for your letter of 20 September 2016 regarding the Australian Government's plans to address the community expectations regarding the management of the presence of per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) on and in the vicinity of several Australian Defence Force establishments around Australia.

I appreciated the opportunity to discuss with you in person some of the priorities that the Commonwealth continues to progress in relation to this important matter. I would like to take this opportunity to provide you with some further context in regards to some of the specific issues you raised in your letter.

During the federal election, the Australian Government committed to investing \$55 million from the existing Defence budget to manage, contain and remediate PFAS contamination on and in the vicinity of Defence bases. For residents of the affected areas of the Williamstown and Oakey communities, this commitment includes funding for a voluntary blood testing program, an epidemiological study to examine the potential health effects resulting from PFAS exposure, dedicated mental health and counselling services, and community liaison officers to connect residents to these services.

*Mental Health and Counselling Services*

In August 2016, the Department of Defence (Defence) engaged the University of Newcastle Family Action Centre (UNFAC) to develop and deliver mental health awareness and stress management activities in the Williamstown area. The project will implement activities tailored for, and developed in close consultation with, the local community.

This project complements the broader Australian Government commitment to establish dedicated mental health and counselling services for residents in the investigation areas in Williamstown and Oakey. The Australian Government has committed to supplement existing programs with additional funding, to ensure additional on-ground face-to-face services are available to support individuals experiencing distress, or who have been diagnosed with a mental illness. These initiatives will be funded from the Defence budget and delivered by

the Department of Health, with the Department of Health also developing a communications strategy to support the delivery of these initiatives.

### *Blood Testing and Epidemiological Study*

It is understandable that those affected by PFAS contamination at Oakey and Williamstown may want to seek a blood test to know their level of exposure and what that might mean for their families. Blood testing is not diagnostic, prognostic or useful to inform patient management.

The Australian Government's voluntary blood testing program will ensure that tests are collected in accordance with best practice quality assurance processes for PFAS testing and help to make sure that community members can receive clear information and support about their test results. The voluntary blood testing program will provide laboratory testing with pre- and post-test counselling by a general practitioner. The monitoring of pooled community samples over time may help determine the success of exposure reduction measures.

In the interim, Defence has established arrangements to reimburse individuals in the Williamstown and Oakey environmental investigation areas who have already obtained PFAS blood tests, and to meet the costs of GP consultations before and after these tests.

The epidemiological study will examine the potential health effects resulting from PFAS exposure in Williamstown and Oakey and will contribute to our understanding of the implications for people living in these communities. The study will be undertaken by the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University. Whilst people will be encouraged to be involved in the epidemiological study, participation will be on a voluntary basis.

### *Property Values*

Defence is aware of the possible impact of PFAS detections on property values. Defence is also aware of reported instances in the community where residents have experienced difficulties obtaining finance or commercial valuations of their property. Throughout 2016, Defence has met with a number of lending institutions and the Australian Property Institute to discuss property lending policies and practices, and how valuations are conducted in the Williamstown area.

While decisions on valuations and lending practices and policies are a matter for individual firms, Defence will continue to encourage valuers and lenders to consider what is now known about the limited pathways for exposure of humans to PFAS, and the implications this may have for decisions on valuations and lending. Defence is also encouraging valuers and lenders to appreciate that across the investigation area, the presence and concentration of PFAS differs based on hydrogeology and other factors.

I note in your interview on Radio 2HD on 29 September 2016 you discussed property values in Williamstown and the need for a land buy back programme. You made reference to your first question in the Senate, in which you asked whether I agreed that the Government should commence a buy-back program. You stated in the radio interview that I said a voluntary property acquisition program could not commence until the epidemiological study had been completed, in two and a half years' time.

I would like to reiterate my response in the Senate on 1 September 2016 in relation to property acquisition. As I noted in my answer, the Australian Government has committed to review the issue of property acquisition once detailed environmental investigations at RAAF Base Williamtown and Army Aviation Centre Oakey have been concluded. Defence is working closely with the New South Wales and Queensland Governments in an effort to conclude these investigations as quickly as possible. Until these investigations are finalised, the Australian Government is not in a position to determine the actual level of risk for existing property use, and therefore is not yet in a position to make informed decisions about whether affected property or land is 'fit for purpose'. Consideration of voluntary property acquisitions is not conditional on the results of the epidemiological study.

*Connections to Town Water*

During the 2016 federal election campaign, the Coalition committed to providing \$3.5 million to Hunter Water Corporation to connect Williamtown area properties to town water, a project initially developed and funded by the New South Wales Government. In discussions between Defence, Hunter Water Corporation and the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet, it was agreed that Defence will fund these works.

Hunter Water Corporation has only recently provided Defence with an invoice for the works and Defence is finalising the payment.

Defence is also working closely with Hunter Water Corporation to consider options to expand its program of works to connect properties close to, but outside the investigation area, where there is sufficient justification to do so. Defence is also working with Hunter Water Corporation to explore the most efficient and effective approach to physically connect properties to town water infrastructure.

I trust this information is of assistance and please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to receive a further briefing.

Yours sincerely



**MARISE PAYNE**

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