

**Opening Statement**  
**Mr Steve Grzeskowiak**  
**Deputy Secretary – Estate and Infrastructure Group**  
*Senate Committee Review of Contamination of Australian Defence  
Force facilities and other Commonwealth, State and Territory sites in  
Australia*  
**Hearing – 3 December 2015 CANBERRA**

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to make an opening statement.

I would like to use this opportunity to acknowledge the legacy environmental contamination issue that has been identified at both the RAAF Base Williamtown and the Army Aviation Centre Oakey and the concern this has raised in the local communities.

Defence is committed to working with the local community, the various State and Commonwealth Government agencies, regional agencies and statutory authorities. Our priority within Defence continues to be ensuring the health of residents and Defence personnel. We are also concerned about any adverse impacts on the surrounding environment.

By way of some background, Perfluorooctane Sulfonate (PFOS) and Perfluorooctanoic Acid (PFOA), are perfluorinated compounds. These man-made compounds have been used for many years in a wide variety of common household and industrial products including furniture, adhesives, food packaging, waterproofing products, carpets, non-stick cookware, clothing and waterproofing products.

The aqueous film forming foam, known as AFFF, which contained PFOS and PFOA, was used extensively worldwide and within Australia by both

civilian and military authorities from the 1970s until mid 2000s due to its effectiveness in extinguishing liquid fuel fires.

In firefighting, the foam acted quickly by smothering fuel with a thin film of foam, stopping contact with oxygen. At the time, this foam was and is still acknowledged as being the most effective way to fight liquid fuel fires where life is at risk. When the legacy AFFF was introduced by both the civilian and military authorities, there was no knowledge of any potential environmental or health impacts.

Defence no longer uses this legacy foam. Between 2004 and 2011, Defence transitioned to a training product known as Ansul training foam, which does not contain any PFOS or PFOA. For fire fighting critical incidents, we now use a product called Ansulite, which contains only trace levels of PFOS and PFOA.

Following worldwide research in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Defence became aware in 2003, that PFOS and PFOA were being identified as emerging environmental contaminants. We initiated a report in 2003, which provided a general overview of the available knowledge regarding environmental issues associated with PFOS and PFOA at that time.

In 2010, following international concerns around environmental persistence, bioaccumulation, toxicity and potential for long range transport, PFOS was added to the Stockholm Convention as a Persistent Organic Pollutant. Australia is a party to this Convention. However, the addition of PFOS has not been ratified by Australia at this time. PFOA is not yet listed under the Stockholm Convention.

This global move sought to abolish the use of these particular chemicals in fire fighting foams because they persist for a long period of time in the environment.

I am informed that these chemicals, once they are absorbed into the ground and into the underground waters, can persist for many decades. Once they are in the environment, they can travel in rivers and in the groundwater. In particular, in some of the places around Australia where groundwater is used for drinking, such as bore water, there is the potential for exposure to people through consumption.

In 2011, Defence included monitoring for PFOS and PFOA in our environmental activities that are undertaken on bases. Defence detected these legacy contaminants at RAAF Base Williamtown on base in December 2011, and we detected they were also going to the boundary of the base in late 2012.

As PFOS and PFOA can persist for long periods of time in the environment, they are referred to as “legacy contaminants”. At this stage, there has been limited research done in Australia or overseas about possible health impacts from long-term low-level exposure to these chemicals.

I understand there are no globally-accepted, peer reviewed, health studies showing that exposure to PFOS and PFOA adversely affects human health. Long term, large scale health studies of workers in the USA exposed to high levels of these chemicals do not show chronic health effects.

Furthermore, the National Health and Medical Research Council does not specify a level for these chemicals in the updated March 2015 Australian Drinking Water Quality Guidelines.

That said, Defence is committed to undertaking ecological and human health risk assessments to understand current exposure scenarios and associated risks.

At Oakey and Williamtown, Defence is continuing to investigate the movement of these legacy contaminants so as to understand the extent of their spread over periods of time. We continue our sampling of bore water and groundwater near the base.

Although we are still conducting investigations, I would like to again reiterate that Defence no longer uses these legacy fire fighting foams.

We are continuing two testing activities in and around RAAF Base Williamtown. The first is an environmental investigation and the second is bore water testing. We can provide you with the findings to date during this hearing if you wish.

As I highlighted at the beginning of my opening statement, within Defence we seek to avoid contamination of the environment, but where contamination is found we seek to manage any contamination in order to safeguard human health and protect the environment. Our priority has been and continues to be that Defence personnel, residents and businesses continue to have access to safe drinking water.

We have asked the residents near RAAF Base Williamtown to let us know if and how they are using bore water. Where they are using it for drinking, we are testing their bores. Where it is their only source of drinking water, we are providing fresh potable water.

In Williamtown, Defence is working closely with Hunter Water Corporation and has already committed to share groundwater and modelling results in order to develop any management strategies that may be required for the aquifer.

Defence is also exploring remediation options for these legacy contaminants. Despite research worldwide, few effective or viable **large-scale** remediation techniques have been identified. We are investigating options for remediating RAAF Base Williamtown.

As highlighted at last Friday's Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works hearing into the AIR 5431 Phase 2 and 3 (Defence Air Traffic Control Facilities and Infrastructure project), Defence has adopted measures to ensure that any current and proposed works conducted at RAAF Base Williamtown do not further contribute to this issue.

Defence has put in place measures to ensure that any site redevelopment does not further contaminate the area or surrounding environment. Stormwater management solutions, as well as assistance provided with flood mitigation measures and earthwork practices, all aim to prevent further contamination.

For example, in line with current agreements between Defence and the NSW EPA, soil with low PFOS/PFOA concentrations can be removed

from site as general solid waste. If soil contains higher concentrations of PFOS/PFOA than permitted by the EPA, the soil is being be stockpiled on site, ensuring the material is appropriately contained so as to prevent leaching into the surrounding area.

We can provide further information during the hearing today on the specifics of the measures if the Committee would find that useful.

Finally, the Commonwealth Government has introduced a Financial Assistance Package, which will be in place until 30 June 2016. The package seeks to ensure commercial fishers are supported during the period of the NSW Government's current ban. This scheme is administered by Centrelink. Claimants can seek support under one of three packages – business assistance; business hardship and/or income recovery.

Thank you.