
Dissenting report of Coalition senators

1.1 The PFOS/PFOA contamination at RAAF Base Willamtown has clearly had terrible consequences for residents and commercial fishermen affected by the NSW Government's precautionary measures and the fishing closures of Tilligerry Creek and Fullerton Cove. Unfortunately, it has been the fear and uncertainty regarding the spread and effects of these contaminants which has caused the most significant impacts for the community.

1.2 In these circumstances, it is important to take a measured and evidence-based approach in response to the contamination. It must be recognised that there have been no peer reviewed studies in Australia or internationally which confirm a link between these chemicals and human health impacts. As Defence highlighted to the committee '[l]ong term, large scale health studies of workers in the USA exposed to high levels of these chemicals do not show chronic health effects'.¹

1.3 Significantly, Defence is currently conducting a large scale human health risk assessment which will provide a better understanding of the contamination from the base and its potential risks. Until this study is completed (in June 2016) it is premature for the committee to be making significant recommendations regarding this situation. In particular, Coalition senators cannot support the recommendation of the majority report to arrange and fund a program of blood tests for residents in the investigation area on an annual basis. The advice of the NSW Health authorities on the efficacy of blood testing is clear:

There are approximately 30000 chemicals in use across Australia. For the vast majority of these, including PFOS and PFOA, very little is known about possible health effects in people...

While blood tests can provide a measure of PFOS, they are not recommended because they don't predict level of health risk.²

1.4 Coalition senators question the value of conducting blood testing for these chemicals if there is no useful information to be derived based on the results (beyond the precautionary measures already being taken). A significant proportion of the population will have a background level of PFOS/PFOA from the previously wide domestic and industrial use of these chemicals. Blood testing can potentially cause needless anxiety and stress for those people who are tested. While each person can consult with their own doctor for medical advice and treatment appropriate for them, the advice of the NSW Government health experts on large scale blood testing should be respected until better data is available.

1 *Submission 87*, p. 4.

2 NSW Health, *PFOS and PFOA – Willamtown RAFF site contamination*, 11 September 2015, pp 1-2.

Recommendation 1

1.5 Coalition senators recommend that the Commonwealth Government continue to follow the advice of NSW Health experts in relation to blood testing for PFOS and PFOA.

1.6 Coalition senators support the Baird Government's assistance package to the affected community through the provision of reticulated water to homes, the purchase of new testing equipment and additional community support, including mental health support services. This is the sort of practical interim assistance the Commonwealth Government should also be looking to provide while the Human Health Risk Assessment and other investigations into the extent of the contamination are being completed.

1.7 The Commonwealth Government has delivered a financial assistance package to support the commercial fishers who have had their income reduced through not being able to work in the areas closed by the NSW Government. However, it is apparent from the evidence received that the commercial fishing industry in this area has specific needs and unique characteristics. Some parts of the financial assistance package have not been targeted to the needs of these commercial fishermen. More work can be done to tailor the financial assistance package to the needs of these commercial fishers. Any adjustments should be undertaken with the assistance of the NSW Government and commercial fishing industry stakeholders such as the Professional Fishermen's Association.

Recommendation 2

1.8 Coalition senators recommend that the Commonwealth Government cooperate with the NSW Government and commercial fishing stakeholders, to better target the financial assistance package to the needs of commercial fishermen impacted by the fishing closures at Tilligerry Creek and Fullerton Cove.

Recommendation 3

1.9 Coalition senators recommend that Defence, and the Commonwealth Government, support the interim assistance measures provided by the NSW Government to support the affected community.

1.10 Liberal senators agree with the majority report's statement that there are likely to be other sites in Australia where residual PFOS and PFOA contamination exists through the previous use of firefighting foams. However, medical understanding of the effects of these emerging contaminants on human health is still progressing. In this context, caution should be applied to any response by government and the framework for addressing the legacy of these contaminants should be clearly based on the available scientific evidence.

1.11 Coalition senators do not support recommendations 2, 5 or 6 of the majority report pending the outcome of further scientific information.

Senator Chris Back
Deputy Chair

Senator David Fawcett

