
The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Inquiry into PFAS remediation in and around Defence bases

First report

PFAS Sub-committee

House of Representatives Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

December 2019 Canberra

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Contents

Foreword	v
Members of the Committee	viii
Membership of the Sub-committee.....	x
Terms of reference	xii
List of abbreviations	xiv
1 Introduction	1
PFAS in humans and the environment.....	2
Conduct of the inquiry.....	3
This report	4
2 Health impacts of PFAS contamination.....	5
About the PFAS Health Study	6
Phase 1—project initiation and literature view.....	7
Questions about the study protocols	9
Phase II—progress and review	10
Component 1—the PFAS focus groups study.....	11
Components 2 and 3—Cross-sectional survey and blood serum study	13
Component 4—Data linkage study.....	15
Effectiveness as a longitudinal assessment	16
Clarity on the health question.....	18
Conclusion	20

3	PFAS remediation—status report	23
	Site investigation and remediation	23
	The partners	25
	The challenge of PFAS	26
	Progress under the National Program	27
	Effectiveness and monitoring	29
	Testing new approaches	31
	Coordination and leadership	33
	State level and regional partnerships	34
	Keeping communities informed	35
	Issues under review	37
	Continued use in firefighting—is PFAS banned?	37
	PFAS remediation—what can be expected?.....	38
	PFAS investigations—scoping and review	39
	The status of investigated land.....	40
	Conclusion	41
	Appendix A – Public hearings	45
	Appendix B – PFAS Health Study	47



Foreword

This is the first report of the Joint Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's inquiry into the Department of Defence's National PFAS Investigation and Management Program. The PFAS Sub-committee will undertake this review to provide ongoing scrutiny of Defence's site investigation and remediation processes over the course of the 46th Parliament.

PFAS remediation is a complex exercise involving many partners. It is also conducted within a sphere of change – research and regulatory reform continue as the nature and potential impacts of PFAS are becoming better understood. In response to this, treatment methods are also being advanced – from sophisticated soil and water cleaning technologies to developments in pyrolytics, which uses heat to break down complex chemical substances like PFAS into safer simpler substances.

This report presents evidence from the Australian National University's PFAS Health Study at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health and from Executive managers of the Department of Defence's National Program. It was recorded in the final sitting weeks of 2019 and provides key information for review as the inquiry unfolds.

The ANU's PFAS Health Study provides an important background and introduction to consideration of Defence's work. The Department of Health commissioned the ANU to build a basis for longitudinal analysis of PFAS related health impacts in Williamstown, Oakey and Katherine.

The Sub-committee wanted greater clarity on this important research into the health implications of PFAS exposure as Defence's massive program of work at 28 sites around Australia proceeds.

The Committee learned that the ANU's study, which is in Phase II of evidence taking and analysis, is unique in a number of ways. The Cross-sectional Survey and Blood Serum Study now in progress uses blood samples from the Government's voluntary survey in these communities. It also broadens the spectrum of analysis to cover people who have lived temporarily in those

communities, and compares these results with people who live in three unaffected locations.

The Survey component, moreover, is not just about blood analysis; it considers the whole spectrum of health effects on people living with PFAS contamination. This includes mental health. This evidence highlighted the importance of keeping a steady eye on the broader psycho-social impacts of living with PFAS contamination, and of recognising that these effects can be different for communities, and groups in communities, at different stages of the remediation process.

In this regard, the frank and detailed evidence given by Department of Defence representatives on its remediation work, and its ongoing engagement with affected communities in that process was welcome. Defence reported a rigorous program of innovation in the trialling and monitoring of methods to reduce PFAS levels in soil and water and to disrupt its penetration into new areas.

The Committee was advised that the remediation methods used are now increasingly effective. Super-concentrated PFAS contaminants can, for example, be extracted by cleaning and efficiently stored. However, there were questions about safety and also about the regulation of pyrolytic innovation, for example.

The Department also referred to 137 community engagements and to available online information, which showed its commitment to keeping people informed about its work. However, the Committee also noted that the management of information, in addition to its volume and detail, is very important – the things communities need to know, including frank advice on land status after investigation or remediation, health research and environmental reforms, should be easy to access from the Defence web-site.

Given the importance and scale of the remediation work the Sub-committee also considered coverage in the Department's annual report should include actual investment, contract arrangements and progress reports for the National Program. More detail was called for in written Questions on Notice within a tight time frame but these were not received in time for inclusion in this report. The Sub-committee anticipates this information will be forthcoming in the near future.

The Committee's inquiry will look for a high level of commitment from Government in this regard and will be monitoring for reforms which will improve the safety and coordination of remediation work in the coming year.

Hon Dr John McVeigh MP
Chair
PFAS Sub-committee



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Mr Andrew Wallace MP

Former members of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

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Membership of the Sub-committee

Members of the PFAS Sub-committee

Chair Hon Dr John McVeigh MP

Deputy Chair Ms Meryl Swanson MP

Members Mr Nick Champion MP (*ex officio*)

Senator Mehreen Faruqi

Senator the Hon David Fawcett (*ex officio*)

Senator Kimberley Kitching

Senator Malarndirri McCarthy

Senator Sam McMahon

Ms Maria Vamvakinou MP

Former members of the PFAS Sub-committee

Senator the Hon Arthur Sinodinos AO (22.7.19 - 11.11.19)

Committee Secretariat

Secretary

Mr James Rees (*till 11.10.19*)

Ms Sonya Fladun (*from 13.10.19*)

Ms Julia Morris (*from 28.10.19*)

Senior Research Officer

Ms Loes Slattery

Administrative Officers

Mrs Dorota Cooley

Ms Renee Dennis

Terms of reference

On Wednesday 18 September 2019 the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade initiated under its annual report powers an inquiry into the remediation of PFAS related impacts in and around defence bases.

The focus of the review will be work progressed under the 'National PFAS Investigation and Management Program', as reported in Chapter 9 of the Department of Defence 2017–18 Annual Report.

The Department's annual report stated that Defence had conducted environmental investigations of 23 PFAS affected sites, with site work being progressed under PFAS Management Area Plans (MAPs), including by:

- provision of alternative water supplies to residents who live near investigation sites and are reliant on bore water for drinking;
- implementation of management and remediation options for contaminated water and soil, including through clearance of drains, the installation of water treatment plants; and
- review of emerging remediation technologies for future application.

The PFAS Sub-committee will undertake the inquiry which will monitor the progress of Defence activity under the National Program and review evolving policy on PFAS related health and environmental impacts over the course of the 46th Parliament.



List of abbreviations

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ARC	Australian Research Council
AFFF	Aqueous Film Forming Foams
ANU	Australian National University
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CRC CARE	Cooperative Research Centre for Contamination Assessment and Remediation of the Environment
ECT2	Emerging Compounds Treatment Technologies
EFSA	European Food Safety Authority
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
FSANZ	Food Standards Australia New Zealand
NEMP	National Environmental Management Plan
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
PFAS	Per-and poly-fluoroalkyl substances
PFHxS	Perfluorohexane sulfonate
PFOA	Perfluoro-octanoic acid

PFOS	Perfluorooctane sulfonate
PMAP	PFAS Management Area Plan
Qld	Queensland
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
TWI	Tolerable weekly intakes
VBTP	Voluntary Blood Testing Program