

Select Committee on PFAS (per and polyfluoroalkyl substances)

Dear Committee

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to provide this submission outlining our personal experience with PFAS contamination.

This submission is made on behalf of Alastair McLaren who was aged 42 when our period of contamination started, Kellie-Jo McLaren aged 45, Michael McLaren aged 17, Angus McLaren aged 15, Eliza McLaren aged 11, Hamish McLaren aged 9. Over a period of 3 years we consumed enough PFAS to put us in the 95th percentile. Our poisoning was completely avoidable.

BACKGROUND

We started our business “Paddock To Plate” in 2009, selling locally grown grass fed beef at our local farmers markets. What made our product different was that 1. It was locally produced, so low food mileage 2. It was grass fed & grass finished, no hormone growth promotants or non therapeutic antibiotics, and 3. it was sold directly by the farmer to the consumer at local farmers markets.

It was a true family business with all 4 of our kids being involved on the farm and at the farmers markets. Firstly it was Glenorie Growers Market, a monthly market where we would sell a whole beast nose to tail, and as the business grew we added Castle Hill Farmers Market, Berowra Market, and in more recent years Richmond Good Food Market. We developed such a strong following in the Hawkesbury that Richmond Good Food Market ended up being our only market, it was close to home and our customers really appreciated buying a locally grown product. We consistently sold out on market days, again selling a whole beast nose to tail and on occasion a whole lamb or goat as well.

Alastair, a 5th generation farmer, originally from Gippsland, Victoria, didn't own a farm but leased several farms in the local Hawkesbury area. The only thing we owned was our mob of cattle, sheep & goats.

In 2015 we added a lease block of close to 200 acres to run cattle on, directly across the road from the RAAF BASE at Richmond. At the time the property owners had someone else running cattle on the property and they told us the property had previously operated as a dairy, leased to a local dairy farmer.

Our business was growing, 5000 plus followers on Facebook, Alastair had just done a TV program with Gerry Harvey & Home Beautiful promoting our business and local Hawkesbury produce.

We were immensely proud of what we had achieved and the product that we produced.

We supported other local businesses, our local abattoir, our local butcher. We did our best to produce a quality product.

THE CONTAMINATION

In 2018 we read a Hawkesbury Gazette article on the Hawkesbury Greens Facebook page that mentioned contaminated waterways near the RAAF base. These waterways were either on the farm or ran into the waterways on the farm that we leased directly across the road from the RAAF Base. This impacted the drinking water of the cattle. PFAS chemicals from firefighting foam used to practice putting out fires on the base had made their way into the waterways through the storm water drainage that flowed straight from the base on to the farm we leased. The article mentioned that people living in the area should not eat locally produced meat. This was shocking to us as selling locally produced beef was exactly what we did. To this day I still can't understand how a newspaper article on Facebook was how we found out about something so important.

I rang the hotline mentioned in the article and filled in a water use survey over the phone with a representative from Defence. (a hard copy of which had been delivered to & completed by the owner of the farm property that we leased, unbeknownst to us. The representative sent me some information including a map that showed some of the highest contamination levels in the area were recorded on the farm we leased and that's when we realised the gravity of the situation. We wanted to know if the water was safe for the cattle to drink and if it was safe to eat the meat produced from the farm.

Despite calls to EPA, DPI, NSW Health, LLS, Defence, Safemeat. Nobody could answer these questions. NSW Health told us "yeah, should be alright" We went round & round, Defence would tell us to ask Health, Health would tell us to ask Defence. It almost seemed like a deliberate attempt to avoid answering our questions. Often when we asked a question it would be replied to with a link to a report sometimes hundreds of pages long and full of jargon. Why couldn't we just get some straight answers?

Around this time we were required to reaccredit for the Livestock Production Assurance program. We weren't sure how to account for the PFAS contamination on the map of hazards on the farm, on the paperwork. We rang the Local Land Services District Vet. Finally someone was listening to us. He organised the EPA to contact us. The EPA came out and tested the water that the cattle drank. They were sorry that we had not been informed of the contamination earlier.

They came back with the results.

The National health based guidance values at the time were

Drinking Water Quality Value PFOS & PFHxS = 0.07ug/L

Recreational Water Quality Value PFOS & PFHxS = 0.7ug/L

Our water samples came back varying from 0.44ug/L to 10.9ug/L for PFOS & PFHxS so over 150 times over the drinking water quality guidelines.

We later learned from a colleague that the vet was reprimanded for assisting us.

We read about the situation in Williamstown, Oakey & Katherine and discovered that people in affected areas were entitled to free blood testing. We were keen to have our blood tested to see if we had elevated levels of PFAS in our blood from eating the beef that we produced. We figured if our blood tests came back okay then that would mean there was no problem eating the beef. Unfortunately despite the best efforts of our GP, and repeated requests to Defence liaisons & Health, we were ineligible for the free blood testing, and would be required to pay \$650/head for the test. With a family of six and being in the middle of the worst drought we had seen in our area, there was no way we could afford \$3900 for the testing. We considered having just Alastair tested but even that was out of our budget.

The EPA came out to the farm with DPI and FSANZ. They told us not to eat the beef but it was okay to sell. We were told that based on their modelling 200grams of our beef a month was a safe amount to eat. (We later discovered that their modelling was inaccurate when compared with the actual figures, so it would have been even less than 200g) We asked how that would affect our business because we couldn't imagine our business could continue with us advising customers to eat only 200grams a month. Seriously. We laughed and then we cried. All of the work that we had done to build our business, all of the people we had been feeding what we thought was the best quality meat, including our own family. It was devastating. The representative from FSANZ hugged me while I cried and promised to help us. I never heard from her again, after an initial reply to my email to her. Much like everyone else who offered to help us, Reps from Defence, local politicians, environmental groups. It quickly became apparent that we were on our own. Business destroyed, entire family poisoned, nobody cared, nowhere to turn for help.

They told us that the PFAS levels in our cattle would drop if we fenced the cattle away from the contaminated water and provided the cattle with clean water. They told us that the Govt had paid for fencing & clean water for a farmer in Williamstown and assumed they could do the same for us. We felt hopeful that the situation would improve and our business may be able to continue once the cattle had gone on clean water.

We followed the advice from DPI and spent thousands on fencing the cattle off from the contaminated water and connecting their troughs to town water but we were unable to get reimbursed. To this date we have not received any reimbursement or compensation for having our lives turned upside down, the loss of our business or the effects on our mental & physical health due to the contamination.

THE MEDIA

After 6 months of not being able to get our blood tested or our cattle tested, Alastair struck up a conversation with a camera man who was filming a house fire near the farm, and we were put in contact with a reporter from Channel9.

Channel9 believed it was a story worthy of being told and arranged to pay for our blood tests and blood tests for the cattle as well. We never wanted to be on tv, we didn't want to be known as the PFAS contaminated farmers. We did however want access to blood testing that was freely available to other contaminated communities. We wanted to know how the PFAS had affected the meat we produced. We wanted to know if it was safe to eat. We wanted to know what our pfas blood levels were so that we could see if eating the meat was affecting us, so we could make an informed decision about whether to keep producing meat on this property.

BLOOD TESTING

When the test results came back we discovered that instead of levels between 2.5 and 3.3ng/ml (Aust averages for PFOS + PFHxS) our family had levels of 86, 55, 49, 40, 29 & 28 (PFOS +PFHxS)ng/ml so for Alastair 22 times average. The recent ANU Health Study (we asked to participate but were not eligible) showed that people in 3 PFAS Management areas had an average of 4.9 to 6.6ng/ml in their blood. Our family average was 47.83ng/ml.

Our kids went through their formative years with high levels (over the 95th percentile in Australia) of likely carcinogenic toxins in their blood. What will be the long term effects on their health? Our eighteen year old daughter has already said she is too afraid to have kids in the future because she does not know how the PFAS in her body will affect them. Every time we take one of the kids to the doctor we wonder if the reason is PFAS. Is a 16 year old with osteoarthritis due to PFAS? Is high cholesterol due to PFAS? Endocrine issues? Gout? Bladder issues? Auto immune disease? Mostly I worry for our kids who had a good life until we were contaminated. Working hard, eating quality food and then everything was stripped away from them.

The test results for the cattle were just as shocking.

Our cattle had levels up to 449ng/ml with a day old calf having 85ng/ml (PFOS +PFHxS).

There is a FSANZ trigger point of 3.5ug/kg in mammalian meat.

A day old calf had a calculated level of 5.95ug/kg so the cattle were born over the trigger point.

We decided not to sell our meat once we saw the pfas levels in our blood. We had only been eating meat from that property for 3 years, so the levels of pfas in our blood were surprisingly high.

DPI advice to just sell the meat at a different market did not sit well with us. We did not want to sell a contaminated product plus the idea of selling a product that according to FSANZ you could only safely consume 200grams a month of was just ridiculous.

Conflicting information was the order of the day. Defence downplayed our concerns whilst a respected scientist told us to wash our clothes separately from Alastair's to avoid additional contamination.

SOIL TESTING

We had the soil on the farm tested. Levels of concern for Agricultural land are pfas levels over 10ug/kg.

The PFOS values on the farm were well in excess of the Commonwealth Guidelines, at up to 260ug/kg

This farm was described to us as not fit for purpose by the EPA.

We were initially told that PFAS in the dust was not an issue, we've since discovered that was incorrect and directly relates to why Alastair's pfas levels were higher as he spent the most time on the farm.

DARK WATERS

If you've seen the movie Dark Waters, if you replace DuPont with Defence, you pretty much have our story. The Australian Govt suggested that what happened in the movie Dark Waters could not happen here because we did not manufacture PFAS, specifically PFOA but I would like to point out the similarities in the story to our story.

PFAS contaminated water from a polluter who knew that they were polluting but did nothing to warn others of the danger.

A farmer who couldn't find any help when his livestock and family were poisoned.

Data gaps.

Withholding information.

Denials.

Heads buried in the sand.

People being silenced.

Why should it require litigation to make companies & Governments do the right thing?

Why are the people charged with protecting us not doing so and treating us like the enemy?

Our business was destroyed overnight, and we now live everyday worrying about the health effects from our elevated PFAS levels, especially for our kids. PFAS are known as forever chemicals, we will be stuck with elevated levels of a likely carcinogenic toxin for many years. We have been treated appallingly by Defence, and the owner of the farm who never told us about the contamination.

Every time we have to tell our story, painful memories of the most difficult time in our lives come back. We feel angry all over again at how we've been treated. It just doesn't make sense to me that a whole family can be poisoned by a Govt dept and there is no care, no responsibility, no apology.

It's not easy as individuals to stand up to an entity like Defence but we're saying you did wrong by us. You tried to tell us that the pfas contamination comes from the packaging of the beef. We tested the animals in the paddock. No packaging.

You said "it's not as if we doorknocked" in response to our question "why weren't we informed of the PFAS contamination.

You said "what difference would it make if you had your blood tested?" when we wanted free blood testing like other contaminated areas.

You told us that we were overreacting to being poisoned with a highly toxic, bio accumulative, bio persistent contaminant.

Over the years I've heard a lot of "In areas where PFAS contamination has been detected, the main focus for governments is the well-being of affected communities". I've never heard anything that felt less true.

Unless you count the phone number for Lifeline given to us by a Defence liason, we have felt no support nor have we felt that the Government was concerned about our wellbeing.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Treat communities affected by PFAS better. Take their genuine fears and concerns seriously**
Provide actual support for them that can help them navigate what can be a very difficult time. Instead of offering links to lengthy reports give them straight answers. Don't force them to contact multiple agencies to get answers. PFAS contamination is not new and yet we continue to see communities going through the same difficult process of trying to get answers.
- **Provide information on PFAS in water, soil, blood testing in an easily accessible way. Information should be publicly available.**
- **Make it a legal obligation that landlords have to tell tenants about pfas contamination affecting a property.**
- **Stop producing food on highly contaminated properties and compensate farmers for their losses.**
- **Provide fair & equitable compensation for people who have lost their livelihoods due to pfas contamination.**
- **Provide free blood testing, medical monitoring and/or treatment for those with high exposure to contamination.**