

Airservices Australia – PFAS Remediation of Former Fire Training Ground at Launceston Airport, Tasmania

Submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works

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Introduction

The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts supports the Airservices Australia (Airservices) submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works for *PFAS Remediation of the Former Fire Training Ground at Launceston Airport*. The proposed remediation works are required for Airservices to meet requirements under the Airports (Environment Protection) Regulations 1997 (administered by this department) to protect the environment and human health from per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) contamination at Launceston Airport. In this instance, those requirements have been determined under an Environmental Remediation Order made under that regulation.

PFAS

PFAS are a group of over 4000 human-made chemicals used for a range of industrial and domestic applications including stain and water protection, metal plating and medical devices. Historically aviation rescue and firefighting services provided at civilian (and other) airports by various Australian Government agencies, including Airservices, used PFAS-containing aqueous firefighting foam until approximately 2010/2011.

The Australian Government recognises the risk of harm to human health and the environment from PFAS in its National PFAS Position Statement. ¹ PFAS can be highly mobile in water and can travel long distances from their source. They do not naturally or completely break down in the environment and can build up in the bodies of animals and humans.

Airservices have held a lease over the Former Fire Training Ground (FFTG) at Launceston Airport since 1995. The site was used for aviation rescue and firefighting training exercises and it is widely accepted, including by Airservices, that Airservices has caused PFAS pollution at the FFTG.

¹ National PFAS Position Statement, Appendix D to the Intergovernmental Agreement on a National Framework for Responding to PFAS Contamination, 21 October 2019, available from www.federation.gov.au.

Regulatory obligations

The department regulates environmental management of leased federal airports under the *Airports Act 1996* (the Act) and the associated Airports (Environment Protection) Regulations 1997 (the Regulations) through a network of appointed regulatory officers (Airport Environment Officers or AEOs). The Act and Regulations place environmental obligations on Airport Lessee Companies and their tenants. Airservices is a tenant on most leased federal airports.

On 30 March 2023, the AEO for Launceston Airport issued Airservices with an Environmental Remedial Order (ERO) under regulation 6.18 of the Regulations. The ERO was issued because the AEO found that Airservices has caused PFAS pollution of soil and groundwater at the FFTG and surrounding areas at Launceston Airport.

The ERO directed Airservices to carry out specified remedial work to address the pollution. The remedial works required under the ERO will be addressed through the proposed works set out in the Public Works Committee submission provided by Airservices.

Under the Regulations (regulation 6.18 (8)), a person who received an ERO must comply with the order. Should Airservices be unable to undertake the proposed remediation works at the FFTG, Airservices would be non-compliant with the Regulations.

Suitability of proposed works

The AEO and department consider these works essential to prevent continued migration of PFAS from the FFTG, which would cause further environmental harm from PFAS pollution.

The proposed works meet the terms of the ERO and have been independently considered by a qualified independent assessor who was appointed to review the remedial plan prepared in response to the ERO. The proposed remedial works are consistent with the remedial plan and are the activities required to address the risks to human health and the environment at and around the FFTG at Launceston Airport.

The nature of PFAS contamination, for example its persistence in the environment and ability to spread over large distances through surface and ground water, often dictates removal and/or remediation of large volumes of soil, management of water flows and/or water treatment. These works are generally costly and complex. The department considers the submission by Airservices represents a reasonable scope and costs of works.