

Submission to the Select Committee on PFAS (Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances)

Date: 23 October 2024

From: Greg Peak

Subject: Inquiry into the Management and Effects of PFAS Contamination in Australia

1. Introduction

This submission addresses the environmental, health, and economic impacts of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) contamination, focusing on risk management, remediation strategies, and regulatory improvements necessary to mitigate the widespread effects in Australia. As a forensic structural engineer, I have been involved in multiple projects related to building contamination, water quality, and environmental damage assessments. My submission draws from this experience in understanding how PFAS contamination affects structural and environmental safety.

2. Environmental and Public Health Impacts of PFAS

PFAS compounds, known for their persistence in the environment and resistance to degradation, are posing significant challenges across multiple sectors, including public health, agriculture, and water management. Studies have shown that exposure to these substances is linked to a variety of health issues, such as thyroid disease, liver damage, and potential carcinogenic effects.

In my experience working on remediation projects, I've encountered PFAS contamination in groundwater, affecting residential areas and water sources. The persistence of PFAS in the environment means that even small leaks or contamination events can lead to long-term environmental degradation, which requires more effective intervention strategies.

3. Current PFAS Management Practices

While Australia has made significant progress in identifying PFAS contamination hotspots, current management practices need enhancement. From my observations in the field, the lack of uniform regulatory oversight across jurisdictions has hampered efforts to address PFAS contamination effectively.

For instance, my work on various insurance claims has highlighted inconsistencies in environmental reporting and remediation requirements between states. This leads to varied levels of response from local authorities and industries responsible for cleanup efforts, which in turn complicates the recovery process for affected communities.

4. Recommendations for Strengthening PFAS Management

4.1. National PFAS Standards

Australia should adopt more stringent national PFAS standards, particularly concerning water quality and land contamination limits. These standards must be harmonised across states and territories to ensure consistent management and remediation practices.

4.2. Strengthening Remediation Efforts

The government should invest in innovative remediation technologies, such as in-situ soil washing and advanced filtration systems for contaminated water bodies. These solutions need further funding and support to become viable large-scale options for PFAS cleanup.

4.3. Transparent Monitoring and Reporting

A centralised database that tracks PFAS contamination, remediation efforts, and health impacts should be established. This platform should be accessible to the public, allowing communities to be informed about the risks they face, and the measures being taken to mitigate them.

4.4. Improved Regulatory Oversight

There is a critical need for better oversight mechanisms that hold industries accountable for PFAS pollution. Strengthening the enforcement of environmental protection laws and imposing stricter penalties for non-compliance would serve as a deterrent against further contamination.

5. Conclusion

PFAS contamination presents a unique and pervasive threat that requires coordinated efforts from all levels of government, industry, and the community. Implementing comprehensive, science-based strategies for managing PFAS will safeguard public health and ensure that Australia can mitigate the long-term impacts of these hazardous substances.

I trust that the committee will consider these recommendations in shaping policies that are critical to managing and reducing the impact of PFAS contamination in Australia.

Signed,

Greg Peak