

How PFAS Contamination Has Affected Us

Our names are Donald and Jennifer Trew. We are both in our 60s and we have lived in Katherine for 16 years. We initially moved to Katherine from Darwin in order to purchase a business and we stayed because we loved the community and lifestyle here. Twelve years ago, we purchased the house in which we currently live. It is the biggest investment we have ever made and is the culmination of our life's work; we purchased it believing that we had secured our future. Knowing the house's value and that it could reasonably be expected to increase, in July 2009, we bought a second house in Western Australia for Donald's elderly parents. Last year, shortly before the news of PFAS contamination broke, we made the decision to put our Katherine house on the market and move to our house in Western Australia in order to retire. We did this knowing that the value of the Katherine house would be enough to pay off both mortgages and have sufficient funds left over for a reasonably comfortable retirement. However, the PFAS contamination was announced shortly after we listed our property for sale, and we have had not a single expression of interest from a potential buyer. Furthermore, house prices all throughout the region have dropped dramatically — in fact our real estate agent informed us that owners are typically having to drop their prices by up to 35 percent in order to have a hope of selling. This means that we now find ourselves in the position of having a primary asset which we cannot sell for anywhere near what it is worth, and two mortgages to pay off simultaneously. Apart from forcing us to put our retirement on hold and increase the number of hours we work, this has caused us significant mental and emotional stress — something that is compounded by the fact that Defence was aware of PFAS contamination well before we invested so much in this property and used its projected value as the basis of buying another one. Had Defence had the decency to make the knowledge of PFAS contamination public, we would have of course made very different financial decisions.

In addition to the stress related to our current financial predicament, PFAS contamination has also caused us — and our family — a substantial amount of stress in relation to our health. Whilst the government's position is currently that there is insufficient evidence linking high levels of PFAS in the body to adverse health effects, there is a clear conflict of interest here, as the government obviously has great financial interest in that outcome.

To summarise, the PFAS crisis in Katherine has caused us significant financial, mental and emotional stress. Having both worked hard all of our lives, we are now facing the prospect of a substantially delayed retirement and an uncertain financial future. It is, frankly, terrifying and extremely unfair. We believe very strongly that we should be compensated — along with other victims of this disastrous situation — for the significant loss in value of our primary asset and the enormous amount of stress that it continues to cause.

Donald and Jennifer Trew