

Parliament of Australia

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee

Senate committee of inquiry dealing with, “the provision of rescue, firefighting and emergency response at Australian Airports”.

This submission comes under terms of reference parts a, d and f. It deals with the way Airservices Australia deals with its employees, both present and past, over the Per and Poly-Fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in firefighting foam issue.

My name is Geoff Fuller, I am 67 years old, retired and worked for Airservices Australia and its predecessors from 1968 to 2011. I was an Aviation Firefighter from 1975 until 2011 and served at several locations around Australia.

After being made aware of PFAS chemicals in firefighting foam at Edinburgh Defence Base, in an article in the Adelaide Advertiser in June 2016, I made enquiries about this situation. What I found was that this was the same foam that had been used by my employer (Airservices Australia) from 1980 until 2010 and that I had not been informed of any concerns by my employer during my employment as an Aviation Firefighter from 1975 to 2011. The more I researched the subject of PFAS chemicals in firefighting foam, the more I became worried about how this may affect me and perhaps my family.

The following is what I have experienced:

June 2016

- Found out about PFAS chemicals in firefighting foam in the newspaper article
- Made enquiries with my GP about PFAS. He hadn't heard of it
- At a cost of \$500 I got my blood tested and obtained results

July 2016

- Found out that Airservices Australia offered a voluntary health check (no mention of PFAS situation) to its firefighting staff in 2013
- 150 of 750 firefighting staff took part and found via the blood sample taken about the PFAS levels in their blood (note: blood test done May 2013- results to staff June 2014)
- When those staff who hadn't been tested asked to be tested (due to concerns raised) Airservices Australia refused as no more money available for further health checks.

August 2016

- I sent letter to Airservices Australia asking to be reimbursed the \$500 I paid for my blood test since I was a past employee and hadn't been given the opportunity to take part in the 2013 health study offered to current firefighting staff.
- I was advised via a phone call from the Fire Station Manager at Adelaide ARFF that Airservices Australia would not be reimbursing me the \$500.

September 2016

- I made several phone calls to Airservices Australia in Canberra requesting a written reply to my letter of August 7th 2016.

October 2016

- In second week of October 2016 I received an envelope containing an Airservices Australia policy document (consisting of 1 page) and a copy of the Federal Government enHealth Policy on PFAS, along with a small cover note.
- Conclusion stated in the documents from Airservices Australia and the Federal Government is that “in humans, there is no conclusive evidence that PFC's cause any specific illnesses, including cancer. And the health experts have advised that anyone who thinks they have

been exposed to PFOS or PFOA and may have any health concerns, should consult their General Practitioner”

- The contents of the documents did nothing to convince me that my past employer (Airservices Australia) was interested in my wellbeing, even though they had known about the problems with the foam for at least 2 decades. Airservices Australia did not inform me whilst I was working for them or since my retirement of anything regarding PFAS. They didn't even offer me the voluntary health study in June 2013.

During 2017/2018 I have researched and found out a lot of information regarding PFAS chemicals and their effects on the environment and humans.

2017-2018

- It is interesting that documents produced by Airservices Australia about the PFAS issue refer frequently to what they are doing to protect the environment, but no mention of what they are doing for their affected staff or maybe affected people in the community surrounding the airports where Airservices Australia operate.
- From my experience Airservices Australia aren't worried about their employees past or present, health. Other than the 2013 once off voluntary health study, no ongoing information sessions with affected employees or any further health studies for past and present affected employees has occurred.

2017

- After raising my concerns with members of Federal Parliament, I have received letters from Government Ministers, who thank me for my contact and concerns about the PFAS situation, but always end up by telling me there is no evidence of adverse health effects from exposure to PFAS, read the Government enHealth information on-line regarding PFAS and if any more concerns consult my GP.
- Then finally as the Federal Health Minister said in his letter “however, as a precaution, it is recommended that people minimise their exposure to PFAS”.
- The Australian Department of Health has commissioned the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University to undertake an epidemiology study in PFAS contamination on the health of residents surrounding the Williamstown, Oakey and Katherine investigation areas. Since the Federal Government, Department of Defence and Airservices Australia have known about problems with PFAS for at least 2 decades why haven't they been setting up health studies, with their own affected staff from all affected locations (not just Williamstown, Oakey and Katherine), from at least 20years ago.

2018

- 26th March 2018. In answer to a question in writing (No.894) in the Australian Parliament. In reply Michael McCormack. MP. States “to date, Airservices has already commissioned 5 independent health related studies”. This is a surprise to me and the still existing firefighters at Adelaide Airport who are only aware of the voluntary health study offered in 2013.
- The New South Wales fire brigade management offered information sessions to all its employees both past and present when the PFAS issue became apparent. Airservices Australia certainly didn't do this when they were made aware of PFAS issues at least 2 decades ago.
- December 2018. In South Australia, the South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service (SAMFS) became aware of PFAS contamination at one of its fire stations. The SAMFS acted straight away, the station building and surrounds were tested, meetings were held between SAMFS management and staff affected. Result was affected staff and families were offered blood tests (with results back after one week not one year). Due to findings of

contamination the station was closed. Clean up of contamination around the station commenced. Further meetings held with consultants (re; PFAS), management and affected staff. Support services offered to affected staff and families.

- The support and services offered to New South Wales Fire Brigade staff and SAMFS staff are vastly different to what has been offered by Airservices Australia to its staff to date.

2019

- January 2019. I have recently been made aware that between approximately 2013 and 2013 there was a process put in place by Airservices Australia to remove any container or paraphernalia associated with Aqueous Film Forming Foam (AFFF), from all Airservices Australia property and fire stations. My understanding is all this material was sent to a place to be incinerated/ destroyed, for which the cost of transport and disposal would have been substantial. All this without staff being made aware of what this process was for and about the PFAS issue.

Summary

Whenever I talk to members of Parliament or Defence personnel presenting forums at Darwin or Adelaide, I ask them why hasn't my past employer (Airservices Australia), Department of Defence or the Federal Government, who have known about the PFAS problems for at least 2 decades, done any health studies on people like me (ex: Aviation Firefighters) to find out the most they can about how PFAS effects humans. Also how much have they consulted with other countries around the world experiencing the same problems with PFAS.

We will not progress our knowledge of this problem if organisations like my past employer (Airservices Australia) sit on their hands and tell their effected employees (past and present) nothing.

How can I trust an employer whose policies and actions don't have its employees' health and wellbeing at heart?

I hope that this submission lets you the committee know that not only is Airservices Australia doing everything it can to cut back on its resources to its Aviation Rescue Fire Fighting Service, provided at Australian Airports, to do their job in the best possible way, Airservices Australia is also ignoring the health and safety of its staff both past and present. All the while the management at the top are telling us what a great job they are doing, how much they value their staff, and are also paying themselves sizeable pay bonuses.

I also hope you the committee will find time to accept my submission and allow me to appear in front of the committee to expand on how Airservices Australia's policies and actions do not take of its employees like they claim to do.

G. Fuller

3rd March 2019