

To the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade.

C/- The Chair Mr Andrew Laming MP

I am Lindsay Clout, Member of the Williamtown Contamination Investigation Community Reference Group, for the past 3 years, as a community representative.

I am the President for the Fullerton Cove Residents Action Group Inc. and I am a resident with a farm and business, which I operate with my wife, in the Contaminated Zone, south from the Williamtown RAAF base near Newcastle NSW.

I write this submission on behalf of my family and community.

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
PO Box 6021
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Parliamentary Inquiry into PFAS contamination.
Commonwealth Government's management of per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) contamination in and around Defence bases.

This submission will focus directly on Section (f) of reference points "remediation works at the bases", targeting Williamstown and examining what has been done and the processes employed.

As a member of the Williamstown Community Reference Group, I have been in a position to hear from Defence directly on their progress at dealing with the contamination and see firsthand progress on base through several base tours.

Our recent base tour in March 2018, covered many of the contamination hot spots and I will begin this examination with my notes taken from that tour and how I interpreted the progress of the clean-up of the contamination.

REVIEW OF BASE INSPECTION

SITES VISITED

1. Lake Cochran
2. Fire Training Pit
3. Moores Drain Water Treatment Plant
4. Water treatment plant for on Base development

COMMENTS ON EACH SITE VISITED

1. LAKE COCHRAN

The suction pumps set up in lake will only allow the lake to be pumped down to approximately fifty percent. Plant not running.

2. FIRE TRAINING PIT

Bores being installed to test ground water and determine spread of contamination from fire pit. This is 2018 and Defence have been aware of the high level of contamination in this area for over a decade and only now testing. Fire training pit close to southern boundary – no testing being done outside boundary fence.

3. MOORES DRAIN WATER TREATMENT PLANT

Water treatment plant on Moores Drain system set up on one of three tributaries to Moores Drain.

This plant is only a demonstration unit with a treatment rate of 1.2litres/second. The plant is fed by a pump no larger than a pool pump.

4. WATER TREATMENT PLANT FOR ON BASE DEVELOPMENT

Carbon filter plant used to treat water exposed as a result of ground works associated with the base expansion was in a state of decommission. When Defence questioned on plant, we were informed it had been de-commissioned for 6 months and had not considered the re-deployment of the plant to another contamination area of the base.

CONCLUSION

Towards the end of the tour I was asked on my thoughts of what I had seen from the tour.

The question caught me by surprise and all I could think of was how disappointed I was at the slow progress in cleaning up the contamination and not seeing any indication of a strategy to prevent the chemical leaving the Base and no action at all to remove the chemical from soil. Considering recommendation 8.6.43 from the 2015 senate inquiry “the committee recommends that Defence release a policy statement to clarify its environment obligations and responsibilities for contamination which spreads to non-Commonwealth land. In particular, it should clarify the capacity of State and Territory environment regulation to apply to its activities”. But I felt strongly that I had not answered the question well enough and spent several days considering what I had seen.

The answer is I saw a collection of un-coordinated actions that did not exhibit a single purpose of dealing with the contamination.

In effect it appeared to be an exercise in window dressing.

Once arriving at that point I then questioned myself as to what I did actually see, then it came clear.

I saw a collection of un-coordinated activities with a single purpose of providing Defence with sufficient material to convince Government and the general public that they are in control of dealing with the contamination.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

I will now discuss the sites visited on this base inspection in more detail and highlighting the questions Defence need to answer.

LAKE COCHRAN

Lake Cochran is a large man made water body designed and built to control water flows exiting the South Western side of the base. It collects surface water runoff and functions as a retention dam, allowing a controlled discharge of water into Dawson drain, to Fullerton Cove, to the Hunter River and ultimately the Pacific Ocean.

For decades Lake Cochran has received firefighting foam run off and as a result became highly contaminated. Action was taken by Defence at Lake Cochran by the installation of major works including a Carbon Filtration Plant to remove the PFAS chemicals from the water and discharge clean water into Dawson Drain. Commendable this action may be, but it is only a small step towards stopping the contamination leaving the South Western side of the base.

When defence is questioned by this Committee on the Lake Cochran treatment plant they will tell you how many millions of litres of water have been treated but they will not tell you that during a major rain event (which can occur up to 3 times per year), the plant cannot keep up with the inflow and is turned off, allowing untreated contaminated water to leave the base and continue to contaminate our community. They will not tell you that the system was only set up to pump the Lake down to 50% capacity during dry periods due to the connection to the upper aquifer, but they will tell you that during dry periods they recirculate water through the plant which reduces the PFAS levels in the Lake, but they will not tell you that following a rain event these levels increase again due to polluted runoff into the Lake.

FIRE TRAINING PIT

Following the announcement of the Williamstown contamination in September 2015, Defence informed the community that the Fire Training Pit was a major source of PFAS contamination, this fact they were aware of for over decade and here we are in 2018 and the first actions on cleaning up the site have begun through water bore sampling.

MOORES DRAIN WATER TREATMENT PLANT

The Moores Drain system allows run off water from the Eastern side of the base to leave in three drains all combining off base to one main drain known as Moores Drain. This drain flows into the Tillegery system and then to port Stephens and ultimately the Pacific Ocean. Properties along the Moores Drain have shown very high levels of PFAS in ground water, with detects as far as the town of Salt Ash. Defence's action to stop the contamination leaving the base through this drainage system to date has been miniscule.

They will tell you that they have a new technology filtration plant set up on Moores Drain, but they will not tell you it is a demonstration plant that can only treat 1.2 litres per second and has a pump the size of a swimming pool pump to deliver water to the plant. They will tell you that they intend to upgrade that plant in the near future, but will neglect to say that that plant will only deal with one of the three drains discharging water from base into the Moores Drain system.

BASE DEVELOPMENT WATER TREATMENT PLANT

This plant was the first filtration plant established on Base, to deal with ground water exposed due to civil works associated with the base expansion, in readiness for the new joint Strike Fighter. At the time of our Base tour we were advised by the Base Commander that the plant had been de-commissioned for 6 months, due to the completion of the building work. We asked the obvious question why was not the plant re-deployed to other contaminate locations on Base to boost filtration capacity, the answer was mute.

This expose of our Base tour reinforces our calls at the December 2015 Senate Inquiry that control of the clean-up be taken from Defence. That call was in my opening speech to the Inquiry, and is in Recommendation 4.6.26 "The committee recommends that Defence and the NSW Government examine establishing a joint taskforce to coordinate the response of government agencies to the contamination from RAAF Base Williamtown".

We were fearful in 2015 that Defence were incapable of dealing with this contamination and now 3 years on our fears have been confirmed.

This Inquiry must yield a major change to the pathway we are now travelling. Defence have spent in excess of \$100million over 3 years and have not yet stopped the contamination leaving the Base and have not treated one gram of contaminated soil.

ANNEXURE A

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Photo 4: Moores Drain East - Page 10









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