

Williamtown and Surrounds Residents Action Group Inc.

Submission

Senate Inquiry - the impact of Defence training activities and facilities on rural and regional communities, with particular reference to RAAF Base Williamtown.

In December 2015, there was a Senate Inquiry relating specifically to PFOS and PFOA contamination at RAAF Base Williamtown, in the following February the senate recommendations were published.

We were advised that as this inquiry also relates to our local issues and the contamination that we should be in a submission to this inquiry. We were also advised to highlight what has or has not happened since this previous inquiry into the Defence Base at Williamtown.

Comments on the Last inquiry recommendations:

1 - Water has been connected to some homes in the contamination area, while others within the area are still awaiting connection and living off bottled water. Homes located near the boundary of the zone vented frustration at not getting connected. Some extra homes in Salt Ash have been included in the connection map but not Fullerton Cove.

It is disturbing for Fullerton Cove as they have high levels detected in their blood of the chemicals and 300 meters outside the red zone, they have had detects of the chemicals in water tanks. What makes this even more frustrating is that the whole of road has water main already set up just not connected to individual homes, surely this is an easily rectified situation and will these residents have peace of mind.

It was also made stressful and hard for some residents to navigate the new plumbing regulations and on top of that the costs involved with upgrading their house plumbing.

2 – Financial assistance package was offered but was nowhere near enough to get the fishing families through the crisis and the ability to pay all of their bills. The package made the fisherman feel as though they were taking handouts, something that many found humiliating as they were proud hard working individuals.

There is a legacy issue surrounding the locally caught fish after the ban, this is heightened by the restrictions placed on red zone residents and how many servings of fish they can consume a week.

3- Mental health support has been offered to the community, however there is distrust with the departments and many residents don't want to access the services. We have witnessed the effects on both a personal level and community level that this devastating issue has caused. The not knowing what's going on with your health, no economic future, the lack of transparency from Defence with information. It all creates further stress and strain on what are already busy family lives.

4 – A taskforce has been set up; however it seems like another level of bureaucracy that the community has to work through. The taskforce is overlooking all national sites with PFAS contamination; there is a chance that Williamstown will get lost amongst the other sites. We need a dedicated person feeding into the Prime Minister and the Defence Minister directly from about Williamstown

5- no information has been forthcoming about voluntary acquiring properties neither has there been any further assistance for people who have needed to leave the contamination zone, we have had several families flee the toxic area to provide a safe home for their families. We have others that have no choice but to stay and are devastated by this every day.

6 – The waterways in Fullerton cove were reopened to commercial fishing in October last year.

7 – Residents are able to have their blood tests done likewise if they have lived or worked in the area, they are able to get one test done and it is up until the end of March next year. There is no mention of annual or even future tests. There needs to be a national scheme to allow other people from contaminated sites to gain access to blood tests. The government and Defence need to take a national view of the health impacts include everyone in contaminated areas and carry out an epidemiological study over a long period of time to really understand the issue and take it seriously and make their investment worthwhile. Our children deserve a future and answers.

8 – There is blatant gap between the state environmental watchdog and Defence, we called for it in the initial inquiry and we are calling for it again, there needs to be legislative change to allow state jurisdiction on commonwealth land or a federal EPA. No other community should have to go through what we have. Only yesterday a final independent report was released into the short fall of Defence. The community should have been made aware of this contamination years ago, back in early 2000 it was becoming practice and well understood that these chemicals were toxic and bioaccumulative.

In a nut shell not much has happened at all since the this first inquiry to now for most people effected by the contamination red zone, in fact for the majority it has only got worse. It has been a long twenty months....

General comments and information relating to the base, contamination, issues and the terms of reference for this inquiry:

- The contamination has being exacerbated by the weekly training activities on base of the firefighting squadron with the foam testing and training of each fire truck
- The impact of the contamination has had an enormous effect of the community on a social and economic level. Families are living with the day to day struggles of everyday life and to throw on top of that, a toxic contamination, its a catastrophe in the making
- Houses prices have dropped significantly, most can't sell, banks aren't lending to the area, families and residents are stuck not knowing what the future holds regarding their health and economic future.
- The area has not reached day one, the contaminants are still leaching off the base on a daily basis

- The base upgrade was put before the community; they have been treating the dewatering water, so that construction can continue on base. Even in light of contamination levels rising off the base
- The base was treating this water and not doing anything else about the other sources of water leaving the base, it took almost a year to get a treatment plan up and running other than the construction treatment plant.
- We acknowledge the base plays an important role within the community however Defence have lost their social licence to operate in the area, they have ruined many lives
- Residents either knew that they were moving near a base and understood the proximity to homes or they have lived there for some time and not had issues with the base and the jets, on very rare occasions locals would have to make complaints. Now however when they are flying low or at night, you can't help but get even angrier at Defence, at the jets for creating this hell. We are all in this shit situation through no fault of our own but by Defence actions and inability to act promptly with community notification and the clean up
- The greater community feels for the RAAF personal and hope that as they are on base they are being looked after and taken care of regarding their exposure to the chemicals.
- As more investigations are carried out it is more apparent that the community have been put last, especially when it came out in the last senate inquiry that Defence was testing for the chemical's with their early detection method back in 1999 off the base.
- The base is only transparent with training activities such as using the salt ash weapons range or advising of training courses if you provide your email or contact details. There is not proactive communication to the greater community.
- As a community we have discussed the current upgrades and wonder if these people working on base are aware of the contamination and what their exposure could be.
- We have been advised by residents who have spoken with Defence officials that the noise mapping for the F-35 jets is wrong and there environmental study was grossly underdone meaning that more local residents will be negatively impacted by these new planes. This needs to be investigated as these training activities will have further future negative impacts on Williamstown and surrounds.
- The community seems to be the last to know about things and from experience there is a disconnect between state and federal agencies with developing policy sharing information and updating the community.
- We truly hope that Defence is utilising local suppliers and service providers as there needs to be some tangible benefit in the time of complete stress, unfortunately we can't offer further comment
- We too hope that opportunities for local companies and services to tender is advertised locally and they too have a chance to be involved, Newcastle has a strong heritage of industry that can surely be utilised, unfortunately we can't offer further comment
- Community members are returning high levels of PFAS in their blood, a worrying trend is starting to emerge that those working the land and outside have higher levels, it indicates an exposure pathway of inhalation and ingestion. As a matter of urgency this needs to be addressed. Defence must carry out air and dust monitoring around our area. The community deserves to understand the complete picture with the situation and until this occurs the community is in the dark and exposure pathways remain unknown
- A set of national guideline lines must be set for PFAS contamination around Australia

- Future training activities must be mindful of the local residents and understand how the activities on top of the contamination effect the community

We have tried to keep this submission brief and relevant, should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact the group.

Kind Regards

Rhianna Gorfine

On Behalf of Williamtown and Surrounds Residents Action Group