

Question on notice no. 96

Portfolio question number: 475

2017-18 Supplementary budget estimates

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee, Infrastructure and Regional Development Portfolio

Senator Glenn Sterle: asked the Airservices Australia on 23 October 2017—

At the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee Estimates Hearing on the 23 October 2017, Airservices Australia were questioned about the continued use of non-CASA approved foams, and whether there is a national management plan to deal with the exposure to ARFFS firefighters to PFAS. At page 165 of the Proof Hansard Airservices Australia CEO Jason Harfield is recorded as stating Airservices Australia is currently reviewing its work health and safety controls:

Senator McCARTHY: A national management plan around dealing with PFAS? Mr Harfield: Yes. We have a national plan where we're going through preliminary site testing at all our locations, and they are underway. We just released last week the results for the Gold Coast for some off airport testing, and we continue to work with the Prime Minister and Cabinet PFAS task force for the whole-of-government approach, as well as, as mentioned before, continuing to review our work health and safety controls to ensure that they are as effective as possible.

Questions:

1. What controls are currently in place?
2. If PPE is your primary control, how and when is decontamination required?
3. who will be responsible for reviewing these controls?
4. When did this review begin?
5. In terms of the legacy of PFAS contamination, have you tested all ARFF fire grounds for PFAS?
6. Are firefighters still being exposed to PFAS when they train on the ARFFS fire grounds?
7. Is Airservices Australia resisting providing testing information to the firefighters union who have made four FOI Requests and are yet to be provided with the information requested?
8. Why is Airservices Australia not blood testing or health monitoring the firefighters for PFAS?
9. Why is Airservices Australia still using the non CASA approved foam at Darwin and Townsville? Is this a cost-saving measure that is putting the lives of firefighters, and the health of the community surrounding those fire grounds at risk?

Answer —

See attachment.

Rural & Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2017 - 2018

Infrastructure and Regional Development

Committee Question Number: 96

Departmental Question Number: SQ17-000475

Program: n/a

Division/Agency: Airservices Australia

Topic: PFAS Management

Proof Hansard Page: Written (6 November 2017)

Senator Sterle, Glenn asked:

At the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee Estimates Hearing on the 23 October 2017, Airservices Australia were questioned about the continued use of non-CASA approved foams, and whether there is a national management plan to deal with the exposure to ARFFS firefighters to PFAS.

At page 165 of the Proof Hansard Airservices Australia CEO Jason Harfield is recorded as stating Airservices Australia is currently reviewing its work health and safety controls:

Senator McCARTHY: A national management plan around dealing with PFAS?

Mr Harfield: Yes. We have a national plan where we're going through preliminary site testing at all our locations, and they are underway. We just released last week the results for the Gold Coast for some off airport testing, and we continue to work with the Prime Minister and Cabinet PFAS task force for the whole-of-government approach, as well as, as mentioned before, continuing to review our work health and safety controls to ensure that they are as effective as possible.

Questions:

- i. What controls are currently in place?
- ii. If PPE is your primary control, how and when is decontamination required?
- iii. who will be responsible for reviewing these controls?
- iv. When did this review begin?
- v. In terms of the legacy of PFAS contamination, have you tested all ARFF fire grounds for PFAS?
- vi. Are firefighters still being exposed to PFAS when they train on the ARFFS fire grounds?
- vii. Is Airservices Australia resisting providing testing information to the firefighters' union who have made four FOI Requests and are yet to be provided with the information requested?
- viii. Why is Airservices Australia not blood testing or health monitoring the firefighters for PFAS?
- ix. Why is Airservices Australia still using the non CASA approved foam at Darwin and Townsville? Is this a cost-saving measure that is putting the lives of firefighters, and the health of the community surrounding those fire grounds at risk?

Answer:

- i. Primary controls include but are not limited to:
 - Removing PFAS fire fighting foams from all of our civilian airport operations.
 - Staff do not train with Ansulite foam where Airservices is required to use it under contract with the Department of Defence (Defence) (at Darwin and Townsville).
 - Provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and training on its appropriate use including the importance of good hygiene practices.

Rural & Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2017 - 2018

Infrastructure and Regional Development

- ii. PPE is inspected at the commencement of each shift and after use. All stations are provided with industrial laundering facilities to wash and dry PPE following normal use.

In the event heavy soiling or contamination has occurred, the PPE is sent off site for decontamination by Industrial Decontamination Services. Procedures are established for this including the use of the correct transportation packaging.
- iii. Airservices' Work Health and Safety (WHS) experts will lead the planned review of our exposure controls in consultation with local managers and staff.
- iv. Scoping of the exposure controls review is currently underway with the aim of commencing the review in early 2018. An invitation has been extended to the United Firefighters Union (UFU) to nominate a representative to participate.
- v. Yes. Airservices investigations have confirmed detections from the historical use of PFAS fire fighting foams at fire training grounds operated by Airservices since 1995.
- vi. Expert advice by the University of Queensland indicates staff working at sites where there may be historical PFAS soil contamination are at no increased risk of exposure if they wear appropriate PPE and practice good hygiene.
- vii. Airservices has advised the UFU through the FOI process and in face-to-face meetings that its FOI requests were so broad ranging they were considered an unreasonable diversion of resources to action them. As an example, the estimated time required to process the most recent request was 280 hours (39 days or eight weeks) for a sample of only two of the 21 sites. The UFU is requesting material for all sites.

Formal face-to-face briefings have been offered to the UFU on a number of occasions in recent months to better understand their concerns. Until recently, the UFU had rejected these offers. They have since reconsidered and we are working with them to arrange a briefing.
- viii. Airservices takes advice as appropriate from the Department of Health in relation to health matters.

The current advice from the Department of Health states that: *Individual blood testing for PFAS is not currently helpful to manage any current medical problems or to predict future health problems. All Australians are expected to have some amount of PFAS in their blood due to the wide range of things it has been used for. A broad range of levels would be expected in all communities due to background exposure. There is no level of PFAS that is considered 'normal' or 'abnormal'.*

Airservices recently advised its staff and the UFU of a planned review of this issue which will include options for conducting another targeted staff health study. This work will see us further consider, in conjunction with the Department of Health, the merits of testing blood serum levels to confirm if our WHS controls put in place have been effective in reducing potential legacy PFAS occupational exposure.
- ix. CASA has approved the foam types used by Airservices at both Darwin and Townsville (Ansulite) and at civilian airports (Solberg RF6). These foams meet the criteria established by the International Civil Aviation Organisation. The use of Ansulite at Darwin and Townsville is required under the Airservices contract with Defence. Ansulite also meets the Defence standard and is consistent with the foam used across the Defence estate.