

PFAS story of the McLaren family – Hawkesbury NSW

Background

Since 2009 we have been operating our business “Paddock To Plate” producing grass fed beef, lamb, goat & eggs, here in the Hawkesbury. As a small producer it would not be profitable to simply sell livestock, or meat at wholesale prices and that’s why we chose to sell our meat direct to the consumer at retail prices at our local farmers market.

For the last 10 years we have been very proud of the product we produce and our business model. Our product was based on cows naturally turning grass into beef, no chemicals, no grains, no hormone growth promotants, no antibiotics. It has always been a true family business with all 4 of our children involved in farming and manning the market stall since they were very young. Not just a business but our way of life, our identity and our place in the community.

We strived to build up our herd of Angus cattle with the goal to produce enough steers to supply a weekly market. We built a strong following of loyal customers at Glenorie Growers Market, Castle Hill Farmers and Fine Food Market and then Richmond Good Food Market. We regularly sold out of whatever we produced, as people appreciated a grass fed locally grown product, a product people knew where it came from and how it was produced. Our tagline became “Grown in the Hawkesbury Sold In the Hawkesbury” Rather than selling our meat at the city farmers markets we wanted to see the people of the Hawkesbury have the opportunity to purchase a quality locally grown product without having to travel to the city.

In 2015 we signed a 5 year lease on a block at Richmond to run cattle on. At close to 200 acres it was larger than our other blocks and gave us the land that we needed to reach our goals. The owners were not farmers but had been leasing the land to farmers for many years. There were cattle on the property when we went to view it. The property was run down, with fences falling down, and covered in weeds but we were happy to lease the block as it was fairly close to home and close to the market so people could see where their food was being produced, and how little food miles were involved. We practiced holistic management principles and we moved the cattle every day to fresh pastures.

We continued selling & eating beef produced on the property at Richmond until 2018 when we first read about the PFAS contamination from Richmond RAAF Base. Once we were aware of the contamination we wanted to know more before we would even consider continuing to sell our meat.

In 2018 things changed

In 2018 we read an article on Facebook that mentioned contaminated waterways near the Richmond RAAF base and we discovered that this affected the drinking water of our cattle. We were stunned that nobody had seen fit to inform us of this contamination despite the farm we leased being directly across the road from the RAAF Base and the main pathway of the PFAS contamination, the stormwater drain system, running from directly into the waterways on the farm.

The article stated "What we understand with cattle is when it's sold into the general marketplace the effect of PFAS is diluted as those cattle are put into the broader supply chain." We thought, well we don't sell *our* cattle into the broader supply chain and what does the “effect of PFAS” mean? Why does this PFAS need to be diluted in the broader supply chain?

For months we tried to get answers from Defence PFAS, EPA, DPI, NSW Water, Health, LLS, MLA, LPA, Safe Meat and anyone else who we thought might be able to help us. We really got the run around

and were forced to source our own information. We wanted to know if the water was safe for the cattle to drink and we wanted to know if the meat produced was safe for human consumption. We were concerned for our cattle, our business, our health and that of our customers.

When we asked representatives from Defence why we were never informed of the contamination they scoffed at us "It's not like we went door knocking" Door knocking actually seemed quite reasonable to us given the small number of people in the Richmond area affected. We just found it unbelievable that you would not inform farmers directly across the road, on a farm that had waterways directly linked the to the RAAF Base's storm water drain. To this day it still doesn't make sense.

I rang the EPA to get more information. I was sent a number of fact sheets & links, none of which were about Richmond. There was Rutherford, Shoalhaven River, Botany Bay & Williamtown.

I rang NSW Health and asked them about whether it was safe for the cattle to drink the water and in turn was it safe to eat the meat produced on the property. They replied "Yeah, should be alright" Admittedly I was hoping for better guidance.

Unable to get answers from Defence PFAS regarding whether the water was safe for the cattle and whether the meat produced was safe for consumption, they advised I contact Dept of Health. Health recommended I talk to Defence and so it went on.

We were told by the DPI that based on modelling 200grams a month was a safe amount of our beef to eat. We asked how that would affect our business because we couldn't imagine advising our customers to eat only 200grams a month. We laughed and then we cried.

We wanted to have our blood tested for PFAS so that we would have a clearer idea what we were dealing with. We would certainly feel more comfortable if the tests showed that after 3 years of eating meat from that property, our PFAS levels were not out of the ordinary. We were unable to get tested unless we paid \$600 each, for a family of 6, \$3600. Oakey, Williamtown & Katherine all entitled to free blood testing but we were expected to pay to find out how much contamination they had put in our blood.

The DPI told us that if our cattle were put on clean water their PFAS levels would drop, and then presumably we would be able to carry on our business once again, with more confidence. But how would we know if the levels dropped if they were never blood tested?

We were told of a farmer in Williamtown who had contaminated water. Defence paid for town water for his cattle and for the cattle to be fenced off from the contaminated water. This did not happen for us and we were forced to electric fence the cattle away from the waterways and provide town water costing thousands of dollars at our own expense.

After months of not being able to get our blood tested or our cattle tested, and being told "what difference would it make to you if you knew?" Alastair struck up a conversation with a camera man who was filming a house fire near the farm, and we were put in contact with a reporter from Channel 9. Channel9 believed it was a story worthy of being told and arranged to pay for our blood tests and blood tests for the cattle as well.

What we discovered in 2019 was that instead of levels between 2.9 and 3.9ng/ml (Aust averages for PFOS + PFHxS) our family had levels of 86, 55, 49, 40, 29 & 28ng/ml up to 22 times average.

Our cattle had levels up to 449ng/ml with a day old calf having 85ng/ml (PFOS +PFHxS). There is a FSANZ trigger point of 3.5ug/kg in mammalian meat.

Our day old calf had a calculated level of 5.95ug/kg so our cattle were being born over the trigger point.

The water that the cattle drank was tested by the EPA and came back at levels up to 10.9ug/L with the PFAS National Environment Management Plan recommending drinking water quality value at .07 and recreational water quality level at 0.7ug/L.

The soil was tested and had levels as high as 280ug/kg for PFOS+PFHxS. Guideline values for agricultural land are 10ug/kg.

Following the recommendations of the DPI we put the cattle on town water. Their PFAS levels did not drop, in fact when we tested them again after 12 months they had gone up.

We had decided we could no longer sell our meat once we saw the levels in our blood after only eating meat from that property for 3 years. Despite their being no regulations or restrictions on selling meat with *any* PFAS level, we could not sell this contaminant on to our customers who trusted us to supply a healthy product.

We had discussed the health effects with scientists and a GP, and despite our Govt still saying that there are no harmful effects to humans, there is evidence to the contrary. This means we will have ongoing concerns for our health and that of our sons and daughter.

Due to the PFAS contamination our family has been through a very difficult time, not only financially. There was so much stress in our household, way too many tears. One of our children started to self harm. Our marriage suffered while we disagreed how best to deal with the contamination situation. Feelings of helplessness and despair took over. There was no joy, only anger and frustration and loss and an overwhelming sense that this just wasn't fair. It was hard to believe that Defence could contaminate the water, the soil, the cattle, our family & our customers and completely destroy our business and then treat *us* like the enemy. No offer of any advice nor assistance. In fact they mocked us, belittled us, ridiculed us and discredited us to others.

This whole ordeal has been exhausting, as well as frustrating, heartbreaking, infuriating, depressing and soul destroying. What we had before the contamination is gone. Our kids have missed out on so much. It's been nearly two years since we found out about the PFAS contamination, reading newspaper articles, watching documentaries, reading reports, attending meetings, reading Human Health Risk Assessments, listening to podcasts, PFAS Google alerts. Too much of our lives has been dedicated to understanding PFAS and whilst we can't remove it from our bodies we don't want to lose any more of our lives to dealing with this contamination.

With the coronavirus many people were forced to temporarily close their businesses, within days there were relief packages. Our business was destroyed through no fault of our own but we are forced to either join a class action, privately litigate or put in a claim with Defence and wait years for an outcome. As far as we are aware only one of these unlitigated claims has ever been paid. Why must we be forced to take legal action for the Government to do the right thing?

As the EPA states "The polluter pays. Defence is the polluter."

