

November 18, 2016

Submission from Meryl Swanson, Member for Paterson

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Submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works inquiry: LAND 17 Phase 1B/1C – Construction and upgrade of indirect fire support facilities

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry.

My submission relates to Project Element 7 at RAAF Base Williamtown, which is in my federal electorate of Paterson.

Broadly, I support the expansion of the base as a driver of jobs in our local economy, and the JFO/JTAC Simulator in particular as an important part in our Defence capability.

The concerns I raise fall under the following sections of the Defence submission:

- Environmental impacts of the works (11)
- Consultation with key stakeholders (16)
- Community consultation (18 and 47)
- Public transport, local roads and traffic concerns (43)
- Impact on local community (46)
- Workplace health and safety (63-65)

The committee will likely be aware of the concern of our community following the announcement of per and poly-fluoro alkyl substances (PFAS) contamination from firefighting foam to the Williamtown RAAF base and the area surrounding it.

Similarly the committee will likely be aware of the environmental investigations undertaken by Defence contractor AECOM in the 15 months since the contamination was made public, and the

designation of an investigation area by the NSW EPA, colloquially in the community called the red zone.

The link to the Department of Defence website provides information on that investigation.

<http://www.defence.gov.au/id/Williamtown/>

Despite Defence efforts, there is considerable distrust in the community about the length of time taken for investigations since the announcement of contamination, and the delay in making information public, both before and after the contamination was announced.

Also, despite health warnings that focused on the ingestion pathways of contaminated water and soil, the community is now calling for air testing, as blood testing of residents has shown elevated levels of PFAS even in people who have taken the strictest precautions.

These links are to recent Newcastle Herald reports.

<http://www.theherald.com.au/story/4298380/family-flees-the-red-zone/?cs=303>

<http://www.theherald.com.au/story/4298428/claim-knocked-back-by-defence/?cs=305>

<http://www.theherald.com.au/story/4298394/resident-slams-guidelines/?cs=305>

<http://www.theherald.com.au/story/4298337/blood-tests-confirm-farmers-worst-fears/>

There has also been a documented drop in property values in the area, with advice from the NSW Valuer General to residents that the land values have been reduced by 15% in the past year. Port Stephens Council notified that it had adjusted rates accordingly.

While there have been calls to halt any future development on the base until the PFAS contamination has been stopped from leaching from the base, the ground and water remediated, and the community offered a permanent solution, that is not my view.

However, I would seek to make sure the expansion of the base does not exacerbate the leaching of PFAS from the base, and that earthworks do not contribute to dust pollution.

Addressing each point in turn:

- Environmental impacts of the works

I would seek to ensure that the expansion has no further impact on PFAS contamination leaching from the base, and no further contribution to air pollution.

- Consultation with key stakeholders

I would seek to ensure that key stakeholders are kept fully informed about works on the base and any impacts. While the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet did set up an Elected Representatives Group in regard to the PFAS contamination issue, involving state and federal elected members and state and federal departments, these meetings have often been unable to answer questions we have asked, and been organised at difficult times including parliamentary sitting days. If such a group is set up in regard to RAAF base expansion, it needs to be better organised and informed.

- Community consultation

I would seek to ensure better communication with the community about works going on at the base, given the level of distrust that is currently felt. A Community Reference Group was set up, similar to the ERG mentioned above, and members expressed to me their frustration at not having questions answered fully and promptly. An improved process is required for RAAF base expansion, especially as the community will consider this work will likely impact the PFAS contamination.

- Public transport, local roads and traffic concerns

The RAAF base is on a main and quite dangerous thoroughfare, and all care needs to be taken to ensure the movement of traffic does not affect local residents and their safety.

- Impact on local community

I would urge the committee not simply to focus on the positive impacts of the base expansion, in terms of local jobs and Defence capability, but to be cognisant of the level of ill feeling in the community towards Defence over its handling of the PFAS issue. Similarly, Defence spending is likely to be criticised by members of the community who are seeking to have their properties bought by the Federal Government, as they no longer feel it is safe to live there.

- Workplace health and safety

I would seek to ensure that employees and contractors on the base are not adversely affected by PFAS contamination. I would urge they be made fully aware of the health risks, and be protected as best they can from exposure. I would urge that PFAS blood testing of employees and contractors take place, and that air monitoring take place on the base as part of a broader air monitoring program in the area.

In closing, I would urge the committee to fully understand the issue of PFAS contamination as it affects the community around Williamtown RAAF base, and as it is likely to affect 16 bases throughout Australia.

PFAS is described as an emerging contaminant, and our knowledge of it is limited. While the position of the Federal Government is that there is no consistent evidence to link these chemicals with adverse health outcomes, there is considerable international work that does point to links.

While this expansion will be welcomed by many, our community deserves rigorous assessment of the work and a guarantee that they will not be further adversely affected.

Thank you.