

6 April 2020

To: PFAS Sub-committee: Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT)
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From: Hawkesbury Environment Network


Submission: Inquiry into PFAS remediation in and around Defence bases

Attachments Enclosed: McLaren Family's Story
Joanna Pickford's Story
HEN PFAS INFO NIGHT- Q&A Oct 2019
PFAS Community Walk-In Session Q&A- FINAL

Firstly, we would like to thank you for reaching out to the Hawkesbury Environment Network to respond with a submission for your inquiry. We are grateful that the JSCFADT has committed to questioning and monitoring the 'National PFAS Investigation and Management Program.' In our submission, we have put forward not only our views, but also the views of our sub-committee, The Hawkesbury PFAS Community Network, as well as, those from residents from our local area.

Having read *Whole of Australian Government response to the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry into the management of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) contamination in and around Defence bases* we have determined that they have put structures in place for dealing with PFAS issues across Australia and that they purport that these structures are working to mitigate PFAS contamination. Here in the Hawkesbury we can say that these structures have not been tailored to our PFAS effected area and that we feel downplayed verging on downright ignored. What is evident to us is that their response is fractured and not nationwide, in fact it appears that Defence is using data from only three sites and then disseminating that information at other locations assuming it is relevant across Australia.

We believe the area surrounding Richmond RAAF Base has not been fully considered in the response. There are farms on the Lowlands known to be high in PFAS and we know that Defence have no plans to remediate this land. Western Sydney University testing demonstrated that areas of the Lowlands around Bakers Lagoon have PFAS readings of 300 parts per million, with other nearby areas also being contaminated. This area is still growing beef, sheep, chickens, vegetables and turf. These are all probably being sold locally and through other markets. We have evidence of cattle from the Lowlands sold in Mossvale is returning to the Hawkesbury to Wilberforce for distribution. The area around Pughs Lagoon where people are often seen fishing has PFAS readings of 100 parts per million. Turf in the drought turns up a lot of dust. This means that turf farmers in this area could absorb a lot of PFAS via dust. None of this has been considered. If Defence has done any testing of beef or other produce from the Lowlands, we are unaware of it. It would appear data from Williamstown and Oakey have been used to assume the contamination level in produce in this area.

We understand only from the information we have been able to gather from Western Sydney University that PFAS contamination is only in a very specific area in the Hawkesbury, but most landowners in this effected area do not have letterboxes and some have English as a second language. We know for a fact that a landholder who borders Baker's Lagoon was totally unaware of the very high levels of PFAS contamination literally at their doorstep. We believe there has been an inadequate attempt from Defence and our Local Council to reach these landholders. If it were not for our local community group forming to inform the community, many more people would be unaware of PFAS being a serious issue in this area. It has been left to our community volunteers to undertake informing the community without any budget.

When we learned of the very high readings of PFAS in the blood of Lowlands farmers we asked for free blood testing to be made available to our area, however we are not considered to be of high enough concern for testing to be undertaken and we do not agree. We were also told by Defence that blood testing only causes anxiety amongst residents and that they did not advise making it available to us. We would appreciate not being run with a "nanny state" mentality and we strongly believe that you cannot manage what you do not measure. We believe free blood testing should be made available to our local residents who wish to have their blood tested. We need to document where we are at now and then have access to ongoing testing. As the Health industry discovers more and more about the effects of PFAS on the human body we do not want our local area to be ignored. The cost of undertaking the blood testing ourselves is cost prohibitive and having spoken to a phlebotomist in the area the cost should not be as high as it is based on the simplicity of the test compared to other blood tests. We believe we should be able to access the tests on Medicare in the same way as testing for lead in the blood can be undertaken through Medicare.

We also believe doctors clinics in the area should be briefed on the contamination to better assist with health information and so you can gather data on instances of conditions that may be higher in the Hawkesbury than other unaffected communities. Also useful would be the production and public release of, statistics regarding the number of low birth weight children born in local hospitals, the incidence of hypertension and of kidney cancer.

Council has not been equipped to undertake any kind of support of the community regarding PFAS. There has been no dissemination of information relevant to ratepayers or residents by Council who have remained totally silent on the matter despite our best efforts to get them to assist us. It seems as though they have been somehow 'silenced.' If Richmond Defence had worked with Council the community would have been much better informed. We are aware that properties affected by PFAS are being bought and sold and the information of contamination is not raised at any level. It is being left to individuals purchasing properties to find out for themselves that the land is or is not contaminated and how would they be expected to know that, when Defence, Council and indeed real-estate agents do nothing to inform them. People who buy property, as we have evidence, are not aware their land is contaminated. In East Richmond many houses are up for sale and people buying would believe there was nothing to stop them from keeping chickens or growing their own vegetables. There are several properties up for sale in the Lowlands again no information for potential buyers who could unknowingly start producing produce for market which is high in PFAS.

The Hawkesbury PFAS Community Network approached Defence about re-testing soil and water in the Lowlands after the recent flooding but have had no response. The area is flood prone and as PFAS was used from the 1970s, to about 2003. The movement of flood waters could really affect the distribution of PFAS. Defence Richmond has been totally deaf to this probably because there had not been a flood in the area since 1992 until the recent floods. However, during the period from 1970 to 1992 there were 23 floods of higher than 5 metres. The floodplain stretches across the river to Wilberforce. No testing has been done there.

The Defence force and AECOM have produced large volumes of information like the Human Health Risk Assessment which is too onerous for individuals to read to find specific information. It does not follow that providing huge documents to the lay community equals transparency.

Richmond Defence produced a management plan for the area. There was no community consultation prior to the plan being released. Defence held an 'Information session' for the community. It was not well advertised and the way we were expected to get information on the management plan was through a continual automated power point display. People could not ask questions on the management plan with no ability to read it at the session. Since the session we have ploughed our way through the plan and two stark points were the result. Defence only plans to remediate the Base property. And individual landowners are expected to approach defence to have their land remediated. There is no information how to do this and no one is paying costs except landowners themselves. The whole area where Defence sewerage is being disposed is highly contaminated this includes most of Richmond Lowlands including Bakers Lagoon and Coley Creek. None of this area is covered by the management plan. A key issue is whether Defence have an EPA licence to discharge sewage effluent from the Richmond Base and if they do, then the community needs to know what level of PFAS contamination is permitted. Defence is not planning to stop the flow of the chemicals into Bakers lagoon in the immediate future.

The EPA has a policy that the 'Polluter pays' The EPA NSW has clearly stated that Defence is the Polluter of the Hawkesbury and that Defence is responsible, but our community has not experienced this policy in action. Basically, we have been left to fend for ourselves, undertake our own remediation and pay for it ourselves. Of the claims submitted to Defence, we are aware of some being made. No claim has been dealt with in fact the claims once submitted seem to sit in a 'too hard' box and residents hear nothing more about their claims after initially being informed that the claim has been received.

At no time have we, as stakeholders in this matter, been included in a discussion for a viable solution and remediation compensation. We have not been told about how Defence will monitor the contamination in this area.

In October 2019, HEN hosted a PFAS Info Night that Defence attended. We have included in our submission the questions and answers that were discussed on this night, as well as, the questions and answers we took to a Defence led Community Info Session in August 2019. Although there are still holes in the information we have diligently been trying to get this information out to our local residents. What we have determined is that as a volunteer community group we struggle to get this

important information out and we believe better (not more) information is needed. Defence have inundated us with information to the point that there is no clear advice. We even started a section at our local library for the information they have given us. It is unrealistic to think that our local community would be able to easily go through this information to determine how they can interact with their land and water and any animals or vegetables they grow. What we have tried to communicate to Defence is that our LGA is unique to others in the fact that we are semi-rural and our residents take pride in being able to live off their own land if they so desire. We have a well-founded network, for example, called the Hawkesbury Veggie Barter with over 1,300 members who actively participate in exchanging homegrown vegetables. We also have local restaurants and shops that proudly want to showcase our local produce. One of our greatest concerns for our area is that we are completely in the dark to what is off limits to supply and ultimately eat through these community and business ventures. The Hawkesbury is a special place that we want better looked after.

What our community needs is:

- Remediation of PFAS contaminated land that is not part of Richmond RAAF base property,
- An accurate and well-designed map of the chemical distribution specific to our area,
- Signage alerting people not to eat food from the most contaminated areas,
- Assistance with remediation, regular updates of where claims are at,
- Free blood testing for those who want it undertaken,
- Accurate information for the area in a form that is easy to read and digest,
- Council to be involved with Defence so the whole community is informed,
- Proper community engagement about future PFAS management and remediation

We would like to thank the JSCFADT for your time in reviewing our submission and subsequent attachments. We whole heartedly would like to be included as your inquiry progresses. And we eagerly want a solution and advice that is tailored to our local area. Again, thank you for your time.

Regards,



Chairman, Hawkesbury Environment Network