

Chapter 1

Introduction

Referral of inquiry and terms of reference

1.1 On 30 November 2015, the Senate referred matters relating to perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) and perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) contamination at RAAF Base Williamtown and other sites to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee for inquiry and report.¹

1.2 The terms of reference for the inquiry are as follows:

That the following matters, in relation to perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) and perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) contamination, be referred to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee for inquiry and report:

- (a) by 4 February 2016 on PFOS and PFOA contamination at RAAF Base Williamtown and Australian Defence Force facilities, with reference to:
 - (i) what contamination has occurred to the water, soil and any other natural or human made structures in the RAAF Base Williamtown and the surrounding environs,
 - (ii) the response of, and coordination between, the Commonwealth Government, including the Department of Defence and RAAF Base Williamtown management, and New South Wales authorities to PFOS/PFOA contamination, including when base employees, local residents and businesses, Port Stephens and Newcastle City Councils, and the New South Wales Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) were informed of the contamination,
 - (iii) the adequacy of consultation and coordination between the Commonwealth Government, the New South Wales Government, Port Stephens and Newcastle City Council, the Department of Defence and Australian Defence Force, affected local communities and businesses, and other interested stakeholders,
 - (iv) whether appropriate measures have been taken to ensure the health, wellbeing and safety of Australian military and civilian personnel at RAAF Base Williamtown,
 - (v) the adequacy of health advice and testing of defence and civilian personnel and members of the public exposed, or potentially exposed, to PFOS/PFOA in and around RAAF Base Williamtown,

1 *Journals of the Senate*, 30 November 2015, pp. 3518-3519.

- (vi) the adequacy of Commonwealth and state and territory government environmental and human health standards and legislation, with specific reference to PFOS/PFOA contamination at RAAF Base Williamtown,
 - (vii) what progress has been made on remediation works at RAAF Base Williamtown, and the adequacy of measures to control further contamination,
 - (viii) what consideration has been undertaken of financial impacts and assistance to affected business and individuals, and
 - (ix) any other related matters; and
- (b) by 30 April 2016 on PFOS and PFOA contamination on other Commonwealth, state and territory sites in Australia where firefighting foams containing PFOS and PFOA were used, with reference to:
- (i) what Commonwealth, state and territory facilities have been identified as having PFOS/PFOA contamination, and what facilities may potentially still be identified as being contaminated,
 - (ii) the response of, and coordination between, the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, local governments, commercial entities and affected local communities,
 - (iii) what measures have been taken by the Commonwealth and state and territory governments, to ensure the health, wellbeing and safety of people in close proximity to known affected sites,
 - (iv) the adequacy of public disclosure of information about PFOS/PFOA contamination,
 - (v) what consideration has been undertaken of financial impacts on affected businesses and individuals,
 - (vi) the adequacy of Commonwealth and state and territory government environmental and human health standards and legislation, with specific reference to PFOS/PFOA contamination,
 - (vii) what progress has been made on the remediation and the adequacy of measures to control further PFOS/PFOA contamination at affected Commonwealth, state and territory sites,
 - (viii) what investigation and assessment of contaminated sites and surrounding areas has occurred, and
 - (ix) any other related matters.

Conduct of the inquiry

1.3 The committee advertised the inquiry on its website calling for submissions to be lodged by 14 December 2015 for part (a) of the inquiry and 5 February 2016 for part (b) of the inquiry. The committee also wrote directly to a range of people and

organisations likely to have an interest in matters covered by the terms of reference, drawing their attention to the inquiry and inviting them to make written submissions.

1.4 As of 4 February 2016, the committee received 110 submissions for the inquiry. The submissions are listed at [Appendix 1](#) and are available from the committee's website: www.aph.gov.au/senate/fadt. The bulk of the submissions received were from individuals and businesses affected by PFOS/PFOA contamination around RAAF Base Williamtown and Army Aviation Centre Oakey (AACO). Additional information and the responses to questions on notice received during the inquiry are listed at [Appendix 2](#).

1.5 On 3 December 2015, the committee held an initial public hearing for the inquiry at Parliament House in Canberra. On 22 December 2015, the committee held a second public hearing at the Newcastle City Hall in Newcastle. A list of witnesses who appeared at these hearings is available at [Appendix 3](#). The *Hansard* transcripts of these public hearings are available via the committee's website.

Structure of the report

1.6 The first part of the inquiry's terms of reference are directed to the circumstances at RAAF Base Williamtown, but also include other Australian Defence Force facilities. In particular, the inquiry received substantial evidence regarding PFOS/PFOA contamination at AACO. However, the committee has not received sufficient evidence regarding contamination at AACO as part of first part of its inquiry to make recommendations. The committee intends to further examine the situation in Williamtown and Oakey in conjunction with the second part of its inquiry.

1.7 The committee's report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 provides a brief background to inquiry and a summarised timeline of events;
- Chapter 3 examines the impacts on the community around RAAF Base Williamtown;
- Chapter 4 will look at the impact of the fishing industry and the financial assistance provided;
- Chapter 5 will assess the response of government departments and authorities; and
- Chapter 6 contains the committee's view and recommendations

Acknowledgements

1.8 The committee thanks all of those who contributed to the inquiry by making submissions, providing additional information or appearing at the public hearings to give evidence.

Note on references

1.9 References to the committee *Hansard* are to the proof *Hansard*. Page numbers may vary between the proof and official *Hansard* transcripts.