

## Dissenting report of Coalition senators

1.1 Throughout the inquiry, the committee received evidence detailing the Williamstown and Oakey residents' uncertainty and fears regarding the spread and effects of PFOS/PFOA contamination. The effects of these chemicals on human health may remain to be seen, but the effect of prolonged uncertainty and fear is clear. It is therefore essential that authorities take a measured and evidence-based approach in their response to PFOS/PFOA contamination rather than focusing on alarmist possibilities and feeding residents' fears.

1.2 The evidence regarding the risks that PFOS and PFOA pose to the environment is undisputed; however, the effects of PFOS/PFOA contamination on human health are subject to ongoing scientific debate. This is reflected in the official enHealth Guidance Statements, which assert that 'there is currently no consistent evidence that exposure to PFOS and PFOA causes adverse human health effects'<sup>1</sup> and the advice from the National Industrial Chemicals Notification and Assessment Scheme (NICNAS), which noted that the scientific literature on the effects of PFOA and PFOS in humans 'does not give clear, unambiguous results'.<sup>2</sup>

1.3 Hastening to action before the risks to human health are properly understood will cause more harm than good. Professor Jochen Mueller, a Professor of Environmental Toxicology at the University of Queensland, advised that individuals with an elevated reading of PFOS/PFOA are at much greater risk of ill-health from stress and fears regarding PFOS/PFOA than risk of experiencing adverse health outcomes as a result of exposure: 'I think the evidence that is out there...from all I know from the literature, I would not expect that this effects my health in any way. I think people being worried about it affects their health more'.<sup>3</sup>

1.4 Coalition senators remain unconvinced of the value of conducting blood testing for PFOS/PFOA. The NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer, Queensland Government, and the enHealth Guidance Statements recommend against blood testing. EnHealth stated that 'blood testing has no current value in informing clinical management':

There is currently no accepted clinical treatment to reduce levels of PFCs in the human body. Given the uncertainty that PFCs are directly linked to adverse health outcomes, blood tests cannot determine if the PFC levels in a person's blood will make them sick now or later in life.

Therefore, blood tests are not recommended to determine whether any medical condition is attributable to exposure to PFOS or PFOA and have no current value in informing clinical management, including diagnosis,

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1 Department of Health, Environmental Health Standing Committee of the Australian Health Protection Principle Committee, *enHealth Guidance Statements on Perfluorinated Chemicals*, March 2016, p. 3.

2 National Industrial Chemicals Notification and Assessment Scheme, *Submission 47*, p. 2.

3 *Committee Hansard*, 9 March 2016, p. 25.

treatment or prognosis in terms of increased risk of particular conditions over time.<sup>4</sup>

## **Recommendation 1**

### **1.5 Coalition senators recommend that the Commonwealth Government continue to follow the advice of enHealth in relation to blood testing for PFOS and PFOA.**

1.6 Coalition senators are of the view that the majority report is unfairly critical of Defence's response to PFOS/PFOA contamination and does not properly acknowledge the considerable effort and resources being devoted by Defence to address this issue. The majority report also understates the complexity of the contamination at RAAF Williamtown and Army Aviation Centre Oakey and the difficulty of remediating these sites.

1.7 Defence is currently conducting large scale human health risk assessments which will provide a better understanding of the contamination from RAAF Base Williamtown and Army Aviation Centre Oakey. Defence has also undertaken a desktop review of its entire estate to determine where and how aqueous film forming foam (AFFF) was used and whether it is possible that the historical use may have affected soil, groundwater and surface water. Defence has identified a further 16 properties as category one sites which are known to likely to have used substantial quantities of PFOS/PFOA on site and will commence detailed environmental investigations at three 'category one' bases in early 2016: RAAF Base Pearce in WA, RAAF Base East Sale in Victoria and HMAS Albatross in NSW.<sup>5</sup>

1.8 Defence advised the committee that it is developing a national plan to manage known and potential PFOS/PFOA contamination across the Defence estate. The plan aims to 'investigate the extent of the contamination and the potential for human and environmental exposure' and to 'then identify appropriate interim and long term management strategies'. However, Defence noted that unacceptable levels of exposure to PFOS and PFOA in soil, groundwater and surface water have yet to be determined in Australia and that it would not be feasible to determine appropriate long term management strategies until relevant health and environmental assessment criteria have been developed.<sup>6</sup>

1.9 The Commonwealth Government has delivered a financial assistance package to support the commercial fishers and businesses affected by the decision of the NSW EPA, which will continue to be available until 30 June 2016, when the decision regarding the closure of the fisheries is due to be made. A further Business Hardship Payment of up to \$20,000 will be made available on 1 July 2016, and, if the NSW Government does not reopen the fisheries, businesses will be able to apply for a

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4 Department of Health, Environmental Health Standing Committee of the Australian Health Protection Principle Committee, *enHealth Guidance Statements on Perfluorinated Chemicals*, March 2016, p. 4.

5 Department of Defence, *Supplementary Submission 87.1*, p. 5.

6 Department of Defence, *Supplementary Submission 87.1*, p. 9.

Business Transition Payment of up to \$25,000 to 'assist businesses to pursue alternative sources of income if they wish to do so'. The Commonwealth Government will also continue to provide an Income Recovery Subsidy to 'individuals who have experienced a loss of income' as a result of the closure of the fisheries, for a period of eight weeks after 30 June 2016.<sup>7</sup>

1.10 Coalition senators note the Government's undertaking in its response to Report Part A that consideration will be given to the issue of property acquisition once interim health reference values have been established and detailed environment investigations concluded. This is a sensible and prudent approach. Coalition senators also agree that it is appropriate for any compensation claims which are received by Defence to be considered on a case by case basis.

1.11 Coalition senators do not support recommendations 1, 3, and 5 of the majority report, pending the outcome of further scientific evidence.

**Senator Chris Back**  
**Deputy Chair**

**Senator David Fawcett**

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7 Australian Government, *Response to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee report: Inquiry into firefighting foam contamination Part A – RAAF Base Williamtown*, April 2016, p. 6.

