

Media release



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JOINT MEDIA RELEASE | Auckland Council and Ministry for the Environment

Auckland Council briefed on foam contamination

Auckland Council’s Environment and Community Committee today received a workshop presentation from the Government agencies working on historic firefighting foam contamination (known as PFAS) issues around New Zealand and, in particular, in the Auckland region.

Auckland Council Chief Operating Officer Dean Kimpton says the council’s role is to work with the Government group to keep Aucklanders up to date on this issue and identify any further at-risk sites in the region.

“We are committed to helping all the agencies involved in this issue to get important information to Aucklanders in a timely manner.

“This is a complex contamination issue that requires careful investigation, testing and collaboration with a wide range of organisations.

“We will work with the Ministry for the Environment (MfE) to understand the risks that this contaminant poses and any implications for land or water use.

“The council is also exploring the regulatory tools it has to respond to this contamination, especially in the context of other (non-Government-owned) sites in the region that need attention,” he says.

The following is a statement from Ministry for the Environment on behalf of the All of Government group:

A range of Government agencies are working together to fully understand and address the issue of PFAS contamination. They include Ministry for the Environment (MfE), NZ Defence Force (NZDF), Ministry of Health (MoH), Environmental Protection Authority (EPA), Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) and Fire and Emergency NZ (FENZ).

PFAS is an acronym for a group of chemical compounds known as per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances. They are a class of man-made chemicals that have been used since the 1950s in the production of a wide range of products that resist heat, stains, grease and water, including furniture protectants, floor wax, non-stick cookware and specialised firefighting foams. This widespread, but low level, use means most people have some exposure to PFAS without known health consequence.

The particular PFAS chemicals in question (PFOS and PFOA) were historically used in the manufacture of foams used at airports, defence air bases and other locations where firefighters trained to fight highly flammable liquid fires. Use of PFOS has been illegal since 2006 so this is largely a historical issue, although EPA investigations have uncovered current issues at some regional airports.

With the emergence of concerns in the Auckland region, Government agencies have begun working with Auckland Council on the issue, to ensure local knowledge, expertise and experience can be brought to bear. The council is also able to ensure local concerns are represented effectively to central Government.

Led by MfE, Government agencies have today updated Auckland councillors on progress to date in the Auckland region and next steps in the investigation. This follows regular contact over the preceding few weeks.

The New Zealand Defence Force concentrated its early investigations at bases where firefighting training had occurred and where it was known drinking water at properties surrounding had been taken from bores and wells – i.e. Ohakea and Woodbourne. Bases where firefighting training has been carried out but where the drinking-water was thought to be sourced remotely, e.g. from a town supply, were the next priority for investigation, and that work has now begun. Whenuapai, Hobsonville and Devonport are in this latter group.

Research into the historical use of the former NZDF base at Hobsonville, and the remediation of the site carried out when NZDF vacated it, has cleared it as a possible source of concern for PFAS contamination. NZDF is now assessing

Devonport Naval Base. Initial testing of soils, sediments and runoff at the Sea Safety Training Squadron has found PFAS compounds in sample sites, although in mangroves this was well below guideline levels. More testing is to be carried out to confirm those initial findings and to provide more information. Drinking-water on the base and in the community is sourced from Auckland city town supply and is therefore not affected. NZDF is starting limited testing of a tidal area, including of marine life, at Ngataranga Bay, to better understand the potential presence of PFAS in the area. Work is ongoing to identify potential contamination risks at Whenuapai.

FENZ is investigating its sites around NZ, and that will include the facility at Mt Wellington.

This is an emerging issue, with agencies constantly learning more about the scale and nature of the problem. As and when testing results become available, they will be shared with council and local communities as appropriate.

MPI says that there is no evidence or suggestion that there is a current general food safety issue, but their food safety experts will review any findings that NZDF comes up with.

Ministry of Health advice is that there is no acute health risk.

For more information visit www.mfe.govt.nz/PFAS

Next steps for Auckland Council

The council has started identifying the list of bore owners in the Whenuapai air base area and will be working with MfE on communicating with those affected in the coming weeks. It is important to note that not all bores in this area supply drinking water or are located in areas of potential contamination.

“We will work with MfE and health officials to provide them with any information, that the council holds, that they require,” says Mr Kimpton.

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