

Australian government reports whitewash responsibility for toxic foam crisis

By Patrick Davies
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A federal government expert health panel report earlier this month dismissed the need for compensation for those exposed to toxic foam and other poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS).

The findings make clear that the Liberal-National government's aim, in calling the review, was to scuttle calls for property buybacks and financial assistance for residents in high-exposure zones, where property values have plummeted and a health crisis has emerged.

Up to 18 airports and defence bases across the country were investigated after soil and waterway tests near the Williamstown air force base, just north of Newcastle, New South Wales (NSW) in 2012. The chemicals are found in fire-fighting foam, which seeped into drains and waterways.

For decades the Defence Department knew the material was potentially harmful to human health and the environment. As was revealed last year, it ignored warnings as early as 1987 that the foam should be treated as "toxic waste."

The PFAS crisis has potentially exposed the federal government to hundreds of millions of dollars of liability.

After the contamination was discovered in Williamstown, a management area known as the "red zone" was established. A number of other contaminated sites were identified nationally, including at Oakey in Queensland and Darwin and Katherine in the Northern Territory.

The Expert Health Panel report acknowledged many of the PFAS health risks. It noted that international studies showed "fairly consistent reports" that PFAS exposure could be linked to problems such as higher cholesterol, increased uric acid, reduced kidney function, altered markers of immunological response,

impacted thyroid and sex hormone levels, later menarche and earlier menopause, and lower birth weight.

The panel also stated that because of the "weak and inconsistent" evidence, some important health effects could not be ruled out.

A number of international organisations, including the US Environmental Protection Authority and the Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry, have warned of possible links between PFAS chemicals and dozens of diseases and cancers.

The panel nevertheless advised the government not to carry out "disease screening" or "health interventions" for "highly exposed groups (except for research purposes)." It recommended research on the potential ties to rare types of cancer.

The report suggested ways for the government to save money on this research. "The best value for money" would be "adding PFAS exposure analysis to existing large cohort studies."

This set the tone for the report. At every turn, it sought to exploit gaps in scientific knowledge, effectively elevating the government's budget considerations above the health and safety of those living in highly-exposed areas.

The report has been met with outrage in the affected communities. Oakey resident Mark Hogg told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "It's just another whitewash, a minimalisation of PFAS contamination."

Many residents have asked why the government's health department has told them to continue to limit their exposure if the chemicals pose little threat.

In the same week that the panel delivered its report, the NSW state Valuer General told residents living in the Williamstown "red zone" their property prices had dropped by an estimated 15 percent. This includes 183

properties that were added to the red zone last November.

Some residents believe the falls in value may be more severe. Many continue to live in the area because they cannot afford to sell.

Last year, a *Newcastle Herald* investigation discovered 50 cases of cancer on the sparsely-populated Cabbage Tree Road near the Williamstown air force base.

The cluster area has several drains that carry water runoff from the base. The investigation tallied cancers of residents and former residents over decades, including the rare cancers that have been linked with the chemicals.

Forced to act on the findings, the NSW Health Department carried out its own investigation into the cluster. In February, it released a report claiming there was no evidence of a cluster.

The department came to its conclusion by sampling people who lived up to 20 kilometres away from the management area, and only included cancer incidences between 2005 and 2014. This excluded at least 18 of the 50 cases uncovered by the *Herald*.

The federal government has tacked an insulting \$17.9 million onto its original \$55 million funding package for PFAS. The package does not include financial assistance for residents. It has been used to cover bare minimum initiatives, such as providing drinking water and free blood tests. These programs have been poorly managed and delayed.

The health panel report was released the day before the federal government handed down its May budget, promising tax cuts worth billions of dollars to the banks, big business and high-income individuals over the next decade. It also brought forward \$500 million of military expenditure, taking the total for 2017-18 to \$36.4 billion. Yet, there is no money for the toxic foam victims.

The federal and NSW reports underscore the determination of government authorities to wash their hands of a deepening health emergency, caused by a decades-long cover-up of the risks posed by the foam contamination.

Residents seeking justice confront a political struggle against the entire official political set-up, including the Labor Party opposition, which allowed the contamination to continue while it was in office.

The author also recommends

Australia: Residents denounce government response to PFAS health disaster
[29 May 2018]

Toxic contamination zone expanded around Australia's Williamstown air force base
[27 December 2017]

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