

Submission  
No 26

**INQUIRY INTO INQUIRY INTO PFAS CONTAMINATION  
IN WATERWAYS AND DRINKING WATER SUPPLIES  
THROUGHOUT NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Murrumbidgee Council

**Date Received:** 27 November 2024

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## **SELECT COMMITTEE ON PFAS CONTAMINATION IN WATERWAYS AND DRINKING WATER SUPPLIES THROUGHOUT NSW**

### **SUBMISSION**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Murrumbidgee Council is located in the Riverina Region of New South Wales, covers 3 towns, Jerilderie, Coleambally and Darlington point, with a population of 3,607. The township of Jerilderie is situated on the Billabong Creek and sources the township drinking water from the creek. Both Coleambally and Darlington Point source their drinking water from ground water bores. As an Environmental Health Officer for Murrumbidgee Council, I undertake weekly town distribution drinking water tests, presented to NSW Health for microbial analysis and 6 monthly Chemistry Test to Forensic and Science Services (FASS). Community concerns about PFAS (per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances) are an emerging concern brought about through media attention of late. Most concerning, is communities are becoming increasingly aware and concerned of contaminants and the health impacts of PFAS in their drinking water sources. Some major concerns are the health risks, widespread presence, lack of community engagement, advice and the need for effective measures to manage and mitigate PFAS contamination in NSW communities.

#### **TERMS OF REFERENCE ADDRESSED**

The terms of reference outlined are quite broad and all will not be addressed in detail in this brief submission. I would like to address the following points.



1. *Consistent Monitoring and screening frequency for PFAS.* Council, along with NSW Health would benefit from a 6 monthly screening of PFAS for surface water sources and a yearly screening of ground water sources to ensure the quality of drinking water is within the regulatory guidelines, irrespectively if the level detected is less than the trigger value. This water monitoring would also benefit natural water courses such as creeks, rivers and high risk sites, along the agricultural boundaries (runoff of Bio-solids and fertilizers) set along the water courses used for providing drinking water. Run off, industrial waste and firefighting activities are typical pathways PFAS may enter water courses and drinking water sources. EPA or NSW Water should be the elected Appropriate Regulatory Authority (ARA) to manage the sampling and monitoring of the natural water courses and other possible PFAS sources within the same catchment, collaborate with NSW Health and Council to ensure accurate and reliable data is transpirable to the community reporting on compliance, decision making and mitigating. The new guidelines proposed by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) with the proposed lower recommended values of PFAS in drinking water may pose further changes in other guidelines such as the PFAS limits in foods, resulting in Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) will need to update their guidelines.
2. *Reporting, disclosure, sharing of data and findings to be made transpirable to the public.* Currently the public aren't appropriately informed or aware of how to find the results of any screening or monitoring taking place in their community. Government agencies should make data sharing readily available, providing clear and transparent information to the public about the findings of PFAS contamination results. These should be provided in layman's terms to ensure the public can easily understand and interpret results. Community engagement and support on the risks and measures being taken to ensure drinking water safety for communities affected by PFAS contamination is paramount.
3. *Identifying communities at risk from PFAS contamination.* The identification of communities at risk of PFAS contamination is potentially a gap identified in the Protection of the Environment Operations (General) Regulation 2022 as the Act mainly refers to firefighting foam and extinguishers with the aim to minimize the release of PFAS into the environment and promote the use of safer alternatives. Other PFAS contamination is typically found in Industrial Sites, Landfill and Waste Sites, Water Treatment Plants and Agricultural Areas. Engaging and encouraging the

community to report to NSW Health on unusual odours, tastes, or health trends related to local drinking water would trigger an investigation on contamination which will identify any community at risk. Assistance would be required from the EPA and NSW Water for protocols of management and mitigation of contamination to ensure the effected communities are kept safe from harmful contaminants, long-term exposure and will pave the way for remediation and preventative action.

4. *The health, environmental, social, cultural and economic impacts of PFAS.* Many smaller communities are already suffering from social, cultural and economic issues. Vulnerable populations often face greater challenges in accessing clean treated water let alone the resources to monitor, screen and test for PFAS. Contaminated communities are at risk of reduced property values and decreasing populations. This highlights the importance of monitoring, screening and mitigating PFAS contamination to protect ecosystems health and biodiversity.

This submission is particularly relevant to the following aspects of the terms of reference:

- (a) The adequacy and extent of monitoring and data collection of PFAS levels in waterways and drinking water courses
- (b) The adequacy of the reporting and disclosure requirements to the public of monitoring and findings on PFAS contamination of water
- (c) The identification of Communities at risk from PFAS Contamination
- (d) The health, environmental, social, cultural and economic impacts of PFAS

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **Enhanced Testing and Monitoring:** Suggest increasing PFAS testing and monitoring in waterways and raw drinking water sources across NSW, especially near high-risk sites. LGA's in non-identified locations to test 6 monthly.
- **Clear Regulatory Standards:** Revise all relatable legislation and guidelines. Recommend setting enforceable regulatory limits for PFAS in drinking water, in line with international guidelines.
- **Remediation and Clean-up Funding:** Propose increased funding for research on PFAS remediation techniques and for clean-up efforts in contaminated areas. Some

clean-up treatments are out of financial reach for smaller communities and would require Government guidance and funding.

- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Suggest implementing educational campaigns to inform the public and local communities about PFAS, potential risks, what to look for and safety measures. Ensure any Government reports are reported in lay terms to ensure the public understand results.
- **Support for Affected Communities:** Recommend financial or health support for communities impacted by PFAS contamination, especially in cases where contamination has affected property values, health or livelihoods.
- **Prevent Further Contamination:** Ban or limit PFAS use and implement regulations to phase out the production and use of high risk PFAS compounds found in consumer products, firefighting foams and water-resistant materials. Encourage industries to source non-PFAS alternatives that will lower the environmental and health risks. Look at enforcing strict controls on industrial dischargers and waste management practices under the POEO Act 1997.

## **CONCLUSION**

This submission only addresses some of the terms of reference. Addressing PFAS contamination is crucial to protect human, social, cultural, animal and environmental health. Consistent monitoring and screening in drinking water and raw water courses supplying potable drinking water to the public is imperative. Phasing out specific PFAS, improved water treatment and improved regulations are paramount. The widespread use, long-term environmental persistence and impact requires changes in regulatory action to ensure the testing, remediation and mitigation is clear, concise and transparent to all communities. This '*Forever Chemical*' is our legacy to our children and grandchildren, as asbestos was a legacy left to us.

Cr Ruth McRae OAM  
**MAYOR**