

Lord Howe Island: PFAS investigations

Update for local residents

Key points

- Lord Howe Island Board (LHIB) as part of the NSW Government State-wide program are investigating PFAS (per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances) contamination stemming from the historical use of fire-fighting foams on the Island.
- Preliminary investigations have found PFAS in soil and groundwater samples close to the airport, lagoon and depot.
- At this stage, the NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) is not recommending that residents or visitors to the Island need to take any additional steps to reduce their exposure to PFAS.

Why is PFAS testing being undertaken at Lord Howe Island?

LHIB is conducting PFAS investigations on the Island. These investigations are routine and are part of the NSW Government's State-wide PFAS Investigation Program. Lord Howe Island has been included as part of the investigation program because of previous use of PFAS-containing Aqueous Film Forming Foams (AFFF) for fire-fighting activities on the island.

Fire-fighting training using AFFF was undertaken at the airport between the period of 1975 up till 2015. One training event was held at the Lagoon in 2000. In 2017 the NSW RFS removed their remaining stores of AFFF from the Island.

What are PFAS?

PFAS are a group of manufactured chemicals that include perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS), perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorohexane sulfonate (PFHxS).

Due to their fire retardant, waterproofing and stain resistant qualities, these chemicals were widely used in some types of fire-fighting foams and industrial products worldwide. PFAS can also be found in low concentrations in many consumer products like food packaging, non-stick cookware, fabric, furniture and carpet stain protection applications, clothing and shampoo.

The most common and prevalent sources of PFAS in the environment is where fire-fighting foams were used for training purposes, particularly on Department of Defence bases and at fire-fighting training facilities.

PFAS are very stable chemicals that do not easily break down and can persist in the environment.

Products containing PFAS are being phased out around the world.

Are PFAS a health risk?

The Australian Government's PFAS Expert Health Panel, in its report to the Federal Minister for Health, noted there is no current evidence to suggest an increase in overall health risk related to PFAS exposure. However, the Expert Panel also said health effects cannot be ruled out at this time.

Because the risks are not fully known, the NSW Government takes a precautionary approach to limiting people's exposure to PFAS.

The Expert Panel's report and a factsheet providing more information on PFAS and human health is available at www.health.gov.au/pfas.

What is known so far?

Preliminary investigations have found PFAS in soil and groundwater samples close to the airport, lagoon and depot at levels that are above the nationally-adopted thresholds.

These findings are not uncommon given the history of AFFF use. PFAS has also been used in many domestic and industrial products and background levels may be present from these other sources.

What are the next steps?

Further investigations will now be undertaken to better understand the extent of the PFAS presence, and what measures might need to be put in place to manage this.

These further investigations will consist of additional soil and water sampling, and may require testing of residential groundwater bores to verify the initial results.

Do residents need to do anything?

Finding PFAS in the environment does not mean there is a human health risk. It is important to assess if there are exposure pathways through which people might ingest PFAS, such as drinking contaminated groundwater or consuming food products watered with contaminated groundwater.

At this stage, the EPA is not recommending that residents or visitors to the Island need to take any additional steps to reduce their exposure to PFAS.

Can I use Groundwater?

Regardless of PFAS detections, NSW Health recommends that groundwater across NSW is not used for drinking, cooking and personal hygiene (including cleaning teeth and bathing) without testing and appropriate treatment. Please contact LHIB if you have any specific concerns regarding groundwater use on the Island.

What is the State Government's role?

The EPA is working closely with the LHIB, NSW Department of Primary Industries, NSW Health and NSW Food Authority to ensure timely and robust investigations are undertaken.

This collaboration ensures an appropriate, scientific and risk-based approach to protect the environment and community.

Where can I find more information?

More information, including detailed investigation reports, can be found on the LHIB website at www.lhib.nsw.gov.au or call the LHIB on **02 6563 2066**

More information on the NSW Government's response to PFAS can be found at www.epa.nsw.gov.au/pfas.

If you have any questions or concerns, call the 24/7 NSW Environment Line on **131 555**

