



PFOS/PFOA Top Questions and Answers

- Fairchild Air Force Base -



U.S. AIR FORCE

1. Q: How long has the water been contaminated?

A: These compounds have been used in household and commercial products since the 1950s, and contamination found in this area could have occurred at any point since then from a variety of military, commercial and industrial sources. Fairchild utilized a widely-used version of aqueous film forming foam (AFFF), a firefighting foam that contained PFOS/PFOAs, from the 1970s until 2016. PFOS/PFOAs are unregulated compounds and are classified as “emerging contaminants” by the EPA, which issues updated lifetime Health Advisory levels of 70 parts per trillion in May of 2016. There was no prior sampling of groundwater in this area for PFOS/PFOA until after May, 2016. Background information on PFOS/PFOAs can be found here:

https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2016-06/documents/drinkingwaterhealthadvisories_pfoa_pfos_updated_5.31.16.pdf

2. Q: Why is the Air Force just now testing the water?

A: The EPA established a provisional health advisory in 2009, then issued a more stringent advisory in 2016. Although PFOS and PFOA are unregulated compounds and still in use in a variety of commercial and industrial products, the Air Force is taking proactive measures to “identify, respond and prevent” as it relates to potential PFOS/PFOA contamination, which led to sampling on base, as well as private and municipal wells within approximately two miles south and east of the base’s eastern fence line.

3. Q: Is it true the Air Force has known for decades that PFCs (to include PFOS/PFOAs) are dangerous to humans?

A: The Air Force depends on the EPA and the Department of Health and Human Services Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry to determine danger to human health and the environment. In 1999, the EPA began investigating PFOS and did the same for PFOA in 2000. It wasn't until 2009 however, that EPA accumulated sufficient information to issue its first provisional drinking water health advisory. Between 2009 and 2016, the Air Force issued initial policy to address restoration of groundwater impacted by PFOS and PFOA, conducted Preliminary Assessments at nearly all our installations and began providing alternative drinking water at certain sites. The EPA issued its Lifetime Health Advisory in 2016 at the current level and the Air Force has adjusted its response to meet that new level.

4. Q: Did the Air Force conduct studies on PFCs (to include PFOS/PFOAs) in the 1970s and 1980s?

A: The Air Force has the ability to conduct risk assessments associated with how Airmen should safely handle materials in their work. The Air Force does not have the capability to address risk associated with drinking water, food safety, etc. Between 1979 and 1995 the Air Force conducted a small number of studies which included PFOA and PFOS, most of which were intended to address occupational exposure risk. The Air Force relies on the EPA to address and set environmental regulatory limits for human health. The EPA conducts rigorous peer-reviewed processes to establish risk levels for chemicals and used several hundred studies that resulted in the drinking water health advisory we have today.

5. Q: Where is the Air Force going to test water next? Will there be continued testing?

A: The Air Force Civil Engineer Center is currently evaluating if additional sampling is needed based hydrogeological data combined with the results from phase 1 and phase 2 sampling. If residents’ wells have not already been tested it is because they are not within the area determined to be at risk for possible Air Force-related contamination. Up-to-date information on PFOS/PFOA sampling can be found here:

<http://www.fairchild.af.mil/PFOS-PFOA-INFO/>

6. Q: I live very close to the base. Why has my well not been tested?

A: The sampling area was created based on consideration of the locations where firefighting foam was used in the past at a previous fire training site and aircraft crash sites, and the natural surface and ground water movement. Private wells that have not already been tested have not been determined at this point to be at risk for potential Air Force-originated contamination. The Air Force Civil Engineer Center is actively working to determine if additional well sampling is necessary. Well sampling has occurred approximately two miles south and southeast of the eastern boarder of the base. A map of the exact sampling area can be found on Fairchild’s PFOS/PFOA information page here: <http://www.fairchild.af.mil/PFOS-PFOA-INFO/>

7. Q: What are the health risks that I should be on the lookout for? How long would I have to be consuming this water to be at risk for health effects?

A: The EPA Health Advisory states that cumulative consumption of water above HA levels over the course of a lifetime has the possibility to place individuals at risk for adverse health effects. For health specific information please refer to the EPA health advisory found here: https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2016-06/documents/drinkingwaterhealthadvisories_pfoa_pfos_updated_5.31.16.pdf

8. Q: I want to have my well tested. How do I do that?

A: The Air Force is taking a proactive, measured approach to sampling off-base wells for PFOS/PFOA concentrations. During the site inspection phase, we have identified wells to be sampled based on probability of contamination, proximity to contaminant areas, and possible pathways from the contaminant to the drinking water wells. If your drinking water well is within the sample area and you haven't been contacted, please contact the Fairchild Air Force Base Public Affairs office between the hours of 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday thru Friday at 509-247-5705. Residents can also pursue private well sampling. Info regarding private well sampling can be found through the Spokane Regional Health District at 509-324-1574.

9. Q: Why was the public meeting held in Medical Lake instead of Airway Heights?

A: The Medical Lake High School gym was selected as the primary meeting location due to its large capacity. There is no public forum in Airway Height that offered suitable capacity. This decision was made and announcements of the Medical Lake location were publicized more than a week prior to receiving preliminary sampling results that indicated Airway Heights wells were above the EPA's Health Advisory levels.

10. Q: If I have a garden and have watered my plants with contaminated water, is the produce safe to consume? Will my pets have health effects from drinking the water?

A: The Air Force does not have the expertise nor authority to conduct a food safety investigation, or to develop food-specific interim health-based guidelines. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) oversees the safety of foods through the assessment of potential exposure and risk. The Air Force goal is to protect drinking water supplies from potential contamination resulting from any of our past activities. We recommend you contact the EPA or local health authorities for information on food safety. The EPA health advisory is specific to the human consumption of water. According to the EPA, water is safe for activities that do not include consumption, such as bathing, doing laundry and washing dishes. The EPA fact sheet on PFOS/PFOAs can be found here: https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2016-06/documents/drinkingwaterhealthadvisories_pfoa_pfos_updated_5.31.16.pdf

11. Q: What is the Air Force doing to fix this problem?

A: The Air Force is continuing to partner with our neighbors and federal, state and local regulators to investigate the extent and sources of the contamination. The Air Force will provide bottled water to the residents of Airway Heights who are on city water residing west of Hayford Rd until the city has flushed their system with clean water from an alternate water source and lifted the drinking water advisory. Residents with private wells that were tested by the Air Force and showed results above the EPA Health Advisory are being supplied bottled water until a long term solution is reached. While we cannot know the extent to which these base activities contributed to the PFOS/PFOA concentrations in this area, or what part non-military sources may have played, the Air Force is committed to working with the community and environmental and public health agencies to protect human health and resolve the issue at hand.

12. Q: If I have my well sampled by a private lab can I filed a claim to be reimbursed by the Air Force?

A: Claims can be filed with the base's legal office. Those who wish to file a claim can contact the Fairchild Air Force Base legal office at 92.arw.civil.law@us.af.mil.

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