

Facts about PFAS

- PFAS (pronounced “pea-fass”) is an acronym standing for “per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances.” They are a class of 3,500 or more toxic, synthetic compounds linked to serious health problems.
- Exposure to PFAS has been linked to a variety of adverse human health effects including birth defects, immune system dysfunction, thyroid hormone disruption, ulcerative colitis and cancer. They can also affect growth, learning and behavior of infants and children.
- These chemicals are highly resistant to oil and water and have been used to make products including dental floss, water-repellent clothing and fire-fighting foam.
- The aqueous film forming foam (AFFF) has been used at many military installations, including Truax Field, for suppressing liquid fuel fires, fire-training exercises and other fire response activities. According to the Environmental Working Group, there are 610 sites in 43 states with confirmed PFAS contamination. Over 60 percent of these are military sites.
- PFAS compounds are called “forever chemicals” because they break down slowly and travel readily through water, above and below ground. They can create huge groundwater plumes that migrate miles from the source. They are also highly persistent in the human body.
- In Wisconsin, sites with known PFAS pollution include Volk Field, Fort McCoy and Mitchell Air Force Base. The highest PFAS groundwater concentration detected was at the Tyco Fire Protection Products plant in Marinette, where many private wells have been contaminated. The plant continues to discharge PFAS-contaminated wastewater to the city sewer.
- According to the Wisconsin State Journal, PFAS-based fire-fighting foam was used at Truax (and other military bases) from 1970 until 2015. But the Madison-based Midwest Environmental Justice Organization traces the use of “burn pits” by the Air National Guard (ANG) to the early 1950s. In 1989, the Department of Defense (DoD) found a range of highly toxic chemicals in soils, groundwater and surface water by the pits, which are located within feet of Starkweather Creek.
- The PFAS foam has filtered into sewer lines or soil from Truax and Dane County Airport into the Starkweather watershed for the last decade. So far, the ANG has not tested soil or groundwater beyond the base perimeter.
- In May 2016, the EPA issued a drinking water health advisory of 70 parts per trillion (ppt) for two common PFAS compounds. Some states have since revised guidelines to set lower limits. In Vermont, the standard is 20 ppt; in New York the recommendation is 10 ppt.
- Wisconsin has yet to set enforceable standards. The state has yet to ask the military to test drinking water wells, despite disturbing outcomes at the Tyco facility in Marinette.
- Madison shut down a municipal well in early March, while insisting the water was safe. On May 16, the Madison Water Utility announced that PFAS had been detected in ten wells.
- Meanwhile, the Air National Guard has claimed it cannot afford to clean up all the pollution it has caused. State and federal governments jointly fund the ANG. The Wisconsin DNR signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the DoD on 5/28/18, overriding all the stipulations the DNR had previously set for cleanup.
- By contrast, many other communities across the country are suing the military, state governments and PFAS manufacturers.