Wallops Flight Facility PFAS Contamination

SUMMARY OF HEALTH CONSULTATION CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Figure 1. Aerial view of the NASA Wallops Flight Facility. NASA

Overview

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) was asked to look at possible health risks from PFAS contamination associated with NASA Wallops Flight Facility (WFF) in Accomack County, Virginia. ATSDR considered the following groups of people:

- Residents consuming WFF drinking water or the Town of Chincoteague (ToC) drinking water since April 2017
- Residents drinking ToC's water before the contamination was found in April 2017
- Visitors who drank ToC's water before April 2017
- People drinking water from wells near the base
- People who eat fruit and vegetables grown near the base.
- Recreational users or workers who interact with soil, sediment, or water on or near the base.
- People who eat fish and shellfish caught near the base.

Health Consultation Findings

- ATSDR is unable to conclude whether there are any ongoing health risks, but current use of WFF or TOC drinking water is not expected to meaningfully increase exposure beyond the background levels from food and consumer product exposures.
  - » Since NASA's response to the discovery of PFAS contamination in April 2017, PFAS have rarely been detected in drinking water for ToC and NASA WFF.
  - » When PFAS have been found, the levels have consistently been very low.

Adults and children living in ToC before April 2017 were at increased risk of non-cancer health effects from PFAS in the town's water in the past.

- » Infants and young children were most at risk.
- » Infants who drank ToC water for three or more days per week were also at risk.
  - » At the levels found, PFAS can suppress the immune system, affect development, and cause liver toxicity.
  - » These findings are based on PFAS levels measured in April 2017, because no earlier data were available.

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- ATSDR is unable to evaluate whether PFAS from drinking ToC water before April 2017 could increase cancer risks.
  - » It's not known when PFAS entered the ToC's wells.
  - » PFAS were likely in ToC's water for less time than the many years ATSDR typically assumes for its cancer estimates.
- Drinking water from off-base wells was not a health concern because PFAS were not found in those wells. Given the low levels of PFAS detected, soil, sediment, and surface water would not pose a health risk to recreational users or workers on or near the base.
- There was no evidence that people could be exposed to PFAS through consumption of locally grown crops.
- ATSDR could not evaluate the possibility of health effects from eating fish or shellfish because they have not been tested for PFAS.

Recommendations

- ATSDR recommends that NASA continue to test drinking water for PFAS and maintain the water treatment system for the ToC.
- Testing fish and shellfish from the area could provide information needed to evaluate potential PFAS exposure from seafood consumption.
- Residents are encouraged to discuss any health concerns with their healthcare provider. ATSDR also provides PFAS information for both providers and the public at: https://atsdr.cdc.gov/pfas/resources/index.html.
- Nursing mothers can continue to breastfeed

Figure 2. The groundwater treatment system building at NASA's Wallops Flight Facility in Virginia. NASA/Patrick Black

Site Background

PFAS contamination at WFF has been linked to the use of firefighting foam in training and other activities dating back to the 1970s. In 2016, NASA began looking into possible PFAS contamination in groundwater. In April 2017, NASA found that some of the wells serving the ToC and the drinking water being supplied to the town were contaminated with PFAS.

NASA quickly stopped using those wells and provided the town with water from other wells on the base that were not affected. Since then, NASA has regularly tested drinking water for both WFF and ToC. In April 2021, NASA also installed a drinking water treatment system for ToC.

Since PFAS was first discovered, only very low levels have rarely been found in the drinking water at WFF and in ToC.

Additional Information

The full report is available at https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/HAC/pha/Wallops/NASA-WFF-PC-508.pdf

For more information about the report, contact Michael Byrns, Regional Director of the ATSDR Region 3 office at (404) 498-1681 or by email at ab79@cdc.gov.

For more information on the work that NASA is conducting at Wallops, see https://www.nasa.gov/wallops/pfas/