

Butler Street Reserve, Byron Bay: PFAS investigations

Key points

- Byron Shire Council is undertaking a PFAS investigation at the Butler Street Reserve, Byron Bay after detecting PFAS within groundwater and the adjacent drain.
- Butler Street Reserve was formerly used as an unlicensed landfill up until the mid-1970s and is considered a legacy contaminated site.
- As part of Council's investigation, the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and Byron Shire Council are undertaking a water use survey and sampling registered bores in the general vicinity of the Butler Street Reserve. This is to increase understanding of local groundwater use and to determine if PFAS is present in the groundwater.
- The EPA will assist Council in keeping the community informed of any developments with Council's investigation.

What are PFAS?

PFAS (per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances) 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 firefighting foams and other 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 are where firefighting foams were used for training purposes, particularly on Department of Defence bases and at firefighting 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.

What is known about PFAS at the Butler Street Reserve?

Byron Shire Council has detected PFAS in groundwater and in the adjacent drain at the Butler Street Reserve.

Council is investigating the presence and extent of PFAS within the groundwater beyond the Butler Street Reserve.

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.

Regardless of PFAS detections, NSW Health recommends that people do not use groundwater for drinking, cooking and personal hygiene (including cleaning teeth and bathing) without testing and appropriate treatment.

The EPA and Byron Shire Council are undertaking a water use survey and sampling registered bores in the general vicinity of the Butler Street Reserve. This is to increase understanding of local groundwater use and determine if PFAS is present in the groundwater.

This investigation will form the initial phase of information gathering and you will be kept informed of the findings.

Are PFAS a health risk?

Finding PFAS in the environment does not necessarily mean there is a human health risk. Expert advice released by the Australian Government in June 2019¹ states PFAS has not been shown to cause disease in humans and “probably has minimal impact on human health”.

However, the Australian Government’s PFAS Expert Health Panel recommends limiting exposure to PFAS as a precaution until further research into health effects is completed. The NSW Government adopts this precautionary approach to assess and limit exposure pathways to PFAS.

Typically, this approach means assessing and minimising human exposure pathways, such as the consumption of groundwater and home grown produce where threshold levels of PFAS are present.

Dermal (skin) contact, inhalation including dust inhalation, and incidental ingestion of PFAS impacted soil are not primary exposure pathways for PFAS.

What are the next steps?

NSW Government agencies, including the EPA and Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (DPIE) will use the water use survey

and the results from the sampling program to determine if precautionary dietary advice is required to minimise exposure to PFAS.

The EPA will oversee the investigation process to ensure it is conducted in a timely and scientifically robust manner and will keep you informed of any developments.

Where can I find more information?

More information on the NSW Government’s response to PFAS can be found at <https://www.epa.nsw.gov.au/your-environment/contaminated-land/pfas-investigation-program>.

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

References

1. The 2019 enHealth Guidance Statements and a fact sheet providing more information on PFAS and human health effects by the Department of Health are available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-pfas.htm#enHealth>

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