

Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School, Tarro: PFAS investigation

Update for the school community and residents

Key points

- Fire and Rescue NSW (FRNSW) are investigating the presence of per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) at Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School, Tarro due to historic fire-fighting training that occurred near the Tarro Fire Station.
- Preliminary results have identified the presence of PFAS in surface soils at the eastern end of the School, near the Tarro Fire Station.
- Importantly the School is connected to town water, so there is no exposure pathway through drinking water at the School.
- Finding PFAS in the environment does not mean there is a human health risk.
- Preliminary site investigation works are still underway. The investigation report will provide a better understanding of the extent of PFAS on and off-site and help inform any potential management actions that may be required.

Why is testing happening at Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School?

PFAS investigations are being undertaken at locations across NSW where there has been the potential for historical use of PFAS-containing fire-fighting foams. These investigations are looking at

the extent of the impact of PFAS, and the potential risks to the community.

FRNSW historically conducted firefighting training with PFAS containing foams on a vacant block of land adjacent to the Tarro Fire Station. This land was subsequently purchased by the diocese of Newcastle-Maitland and Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School was expanded onto this land.

What is known so far?

FRNSW are currently undertaking a preliminary site investigation into their past use of PFAS containing foams during firefighting training at the School. Preliminary results have identified the presence of PFAS in surface soils at the eastern end of the School, near the Tarro Fire Station

The detection of PFAS is not unexpected given the past use of PFAS-containing fire-fighting foams at the site. PFAS has also been used in many domestic and industrial products and background levels may be present from these other sources.

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.

Importantly, the School has advised that they do not use groundwater for any purpose and are

¹ The 2019 enHealth Guidance Statements and a fact sheet providing more information on PFAS and human health effects by the Department of Health is available at:

<https://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-pfas.htm#enHealth>

connected to the town water supply, which is safe to use.

While the School does grow produce including fruits and vegetables, the garden beds are raised and contain clean imported soils. Soil testing has been conducted in the garden beds and PFAS was not detected.

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

What are the next steps?

Once the preliminary site investigation at the School has been completed, FRNSW will provide the investigation report to the EPA for review.

This report will contain additional information and provide recommendations for any further investigation or management actions that may be required at the site.

The EPA will continue to work with the School and FRNSW on this investigation and will keep the community informed of any progress and next steps.

What are PFAS?

PFAS are a group of manufactured chemicals that include perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS), perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorohexane sulfonate (PFHxS). PFAS are very stable chemicals that bioaccumulate, do not easily break down and can persist in the environment for a long time.

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

Where can I find more information?

More information on the NSW Government's response to PFAS including the investigation at Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School can be found at www.epa.nsw.gov.au/pfas.

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

