

South Nowra Rural Fire Services: PFAS investigations

Update for local residents

Key points

- NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) has investigated the presence of per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) contamination stemming from the historical use of fire-fighting foams at their South Nowra site, which is owned by Shoalhaven City Council (SCC).
- PFAS was detected in some soil, sediment, ground and surface water samples.
- Residents of South Nowra do not need to take any additional precautions to limit their exposure to PFAS.

What are PFAS?

PFAS 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 fire-fighting foams and 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 is where fire-fighting foams were used for training purposes, particularly on Department of Defence bases and at fire-fighting 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.

Are PFAS a health risk?

The Australian Government's PFAS Expert Health Panel, in its report to the Federal Minister for Health, noted there is no current evidence to suggest an increase in overall health risk related to PFAS exposure. However, the Expert Panel also said health effects cannot be ruled out at this time.

Because the risks are not fully known, the NSW Government takes a precautionary approach to limiting people's exposure to PFAS. This includes occasionally providing precautionary advice to help limit people's exposure to PFAS. The EPA is leading the PFAS Investigation Program to understand the prevalence of this emerging contaminant in NSW. This program will help NSW be better prepared to respond if any health and environmental impacts become known.

The Expert Panel's report and a factsheet providing more information on PFAS and human health is available at www.health.gov.au/pfas.

Why was testing undertaken at South Nowra?

RFS is conducting PFAS investigations at locations across NSW where there has been significant historical use of PFAS-containing fire-fighting foams. These investigations are looking at the extent of the impact of PFAS and the potential risk to the local community.

PFAS foams were used at the South Nowra site in fire-fighting training and operations prior to the foams being phased out.

What were the findings?

Investigations at South Nowra included on and offsite soil, drain sediment, surface and ground water sampling. PFAS was detected in some soil, sediment, ground and surface water samples.

The detection of PFAS is not unexpected due to the historical 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.

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 ground water or consuming food products watered with contaminated ground water.

Residents of South Nowra do not need to take any additional precautions to limit their exposure to PFAS.

What are the next steps?

PFAS investigations at South Nowra have now concluded.

RFS is developing a Site Management Plan to identify practical and sustainable measures to reduce PFAS impacts at the site.

The NSW Environment Protection Authority will work with RFS and SCC to finalise the management options. Specific details on these activities can be found on the RFS website at www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/pfas.

Where can I find more information?

More information, including more detailed information about the investigation, can be found on the RFS website at www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/pfas.

More information on PFAS can be found at www.epa.nsw.gov.au/pfas.

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