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DEC Responding to Drinking Water Concerns Prompted by Emerging Contaminants

ANCHORAGE, AK — The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is working closely with communities to address concerns over poly- and per-fluorinated compounds (PFAS), also known as perfluorinated compounds (PFCs), found in drinking water in Alaska. This class of chemicals includes perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) and perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) which have been used in firefighting foams and many consumer products. PFOS and PFOA have been detected in groundwater, surface water, and drinking water in several locations in Alaska, including areas in Fairbanks, Kenai, Eielson Air Force Base, Moose Creek, and Utqiagvik (formerly Barrow).

Past use of certain aqueous film forming foams (AFFF) for firefighting has been identified as the primary source of PFOS and PFOA contaminated groundwater and drinking water wells found in Alaska to-date. The most recently identified contaminant plume originated on Fairbanks International Airport (FAI) property and extends downgradient to the northwest. The FAI has sampled 97 drinking water wells and is providing bottled drinking water to affected properties. FAI is holding a public meeting on December 18 from 4:00 to 7:00pm at the La Quinta Inn in Fairbanks, and DEC staff will be available to answer questions.

Significant PFOS/PFOA contamination has also impacted the water supply at Eielson Air Force Base and more than 170 downgradient private water wells in Moose Creek. In Fairbanks, fire training activities at the Regional Fire Training Center resulted in a contaminant plume, and the city has sampled 161 wells northwest of the site. In Utqiagvik and Kenai, PFAS have been found in surface water and groundwater at elevated levels, but haven't been detected in drinking water at levels above the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) lifetime health advisory levels. Monitoring is ongoing in each of the areas.



DEC has been working closely with the U.S. Air Force (USAF), Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, FAI, the City of Fairbanks, and others in response to these contaminated sites. “We’ve been very impressed with the timely response from all parties involved,” said Kristin Ryan, DEC Division of Spill Prevention and Response (SPAR) Director. “The USAF, City of Fairbanks, and FAI have each coordinated with us, identified and sampled drinking water wells, and provided clean drinking water to those whose wells contained PFOS/PFOA above EPA’s health advisory levels.”

“PFAS compounds are considered emerging contaminants because there is limited information on their toxicity. They are being found more frequently in groundwater and drinking water nationally, and the potential health effects are not well understood. As such, regulatory standards are evolving,” according to Ryan.

PFAS are drawing attention nationwide as communities deal with contamination associated with these previously unregulated compounds. In early December, EPA announced a multi-agency effort to address this complex issue and enhance coordination amongst states, tribes, and federal partners. For more information about those efforts at the national level, visit <https://www.epa.gov/pfas>.

PFOS and PFOA were phased out of most manufacturing uses in the U.S. by 2006; however, some products are still in use, and other PFAS compounds continue to be used in firefighting foams and other products. “We have a Catch-22 here with the use of AFFF. It was a great product for responding to hard-to-control petroleum-based and chemical fires and was used quite extensively for public safety,” said John Halverson, DEC Contaminated Sites Program Manager. “Unfortunately, people weren’t aware of the longer term environmental and health risks they pose.”

Human health studies indicate exposure above certain levels may result in adverse impacts including developmental effects to fetuses during pregnancy or to breastfed infants, decreased fertility, immune system issues, and increased cancer risk.

There are currently no enforceable federal or Alaska drinking water maximum contaminant levels for PFAS. However, the parties responsible for the contamination in Alaska have quickly and willingly provided alternate drinking water to properties that exceed EPA’s health advisory levels.



In August 2017, DEC issued a [notification](#) to government officials and firefighting entities recommending review of their AFFF fire suppression inventories to determine if they contain PFOS/PFOA, and if so, guidance on returning or disposing of these chemicals properly.

“We expect more PFOS/PFOA contaminated sites will be identified as additional monitoring is conducted. DEC is committed to protecting the health of Alaskans. As we become aware of these sites, we immediately work with responsible parties to determine if any drinking water has been impacted, and if so, to ensure people have access to clean drinking water. Typically, this involves providing bottled drinking water until a longer term solution is developed,” said Ryan.

For more information, including details about cleanup levels, please see DEC’s webpage on PFAS (<http://dec.alaska.gov/spar/csp/pfas-contaminants>) or contact John Halverson, Contaminated Sites Program Manager, at 907-269-7545.

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