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Eielson Air Force Base Investigates Off-Base Migration of Contaminated Groundwater

DEC and EPA are aware of discovery, monitoring investigation

(JUNEAU, AK) – Recent sampling of drinking water supply wells at Eielson Air Force Base revealed the presence of the chemical perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) at levels exceeding the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Provisional Health Advisory (PHA) level. Concerned that PFOS is migrating off-base in area groundwater, the Air Force is preparing to sample residential drinking water wells in the Moose Creek area.

PFOS is an “emerging contaminant,” or chemical with limited data on human health effects. It is an ingredient found in many products, including fire-fighting foam. Contamination from PFOS likely originates from historical fire-fighting foam use at Eielson AFB, roughly from 1970 to 2000.

The Air Force has responded quickly to this evolving groundwater contaminant problem. Since the discovery of PFOS in drinking water wells on-base in late March, the Air Force has discontinued use of the wells from which samples exceeded the PHA level. The Air Force then initiated groundwater sampling near the northern boundary of the base, in order to ascertain whether PFOS could be migrating off-base. Results showed widespread contamination, with PFOS exceeding the PHA level in groundwater from 10 feet to 100 feet below ground surface.

With the evidence that PFOS in groundwater may extend beyond the base boundaries, residential drinking water wells in the Moose Creek subdivision may be affected. The Air Force began notifying area residents on May 19, 2015, that their groundwater may be contaminated with PFOS, and is offering to sample area drinking water wells. The sampling of Moose Creek residential drinking water wells will be coordinated and conducted by Eielson Air Force Base and its contractors. If the results indicate drinking water contains PFOS above the PHA level, the Air Force is prepared to provide residents with clean water for drinking and cooking, while it investigates long-term treatment options.

Although information on the human health risks associated with PFOS is limited, enough information exists for EPA to have established a PHA level to assess the potential risk from short-term drinking water exposure to PFOS. PHAs reflect reasonable, health-based hazard concentrations above which action should be taken to reduce exposure to unregulated contaminants in drinking water.

State and federal regulatory agencies are aware of this situation and working with the Air Force to ensure human health and environmental protections and to make sure the contamination and any mitigating factors are addressed. Additional investigation will be needed to determine the extent of impacts and evaluate longer term cleanup alternatives; however, the first priority is to ensure that area residents have clean drinking water.

Regulatory oversight for this investigation is provided by DEC's Contaminated Sites Program and the EPA Superfund program through an existing Federal Facilities Agreement with Eielson AFB. These programs are coordinating as needed with the DEC Drinking Water Program and the Epidemiology Section of the Department of Health and Social Services.

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