



PFAS

'Chronic threat' of PFAS firefighting foams raised in 2003 secret UK report

Exclusive: Environment Agency warned about 'forever chemicals' 20 years before it started to regulate them

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The [Environment Agency](#) was warned about the “chronic threat” that firefighting foams containing PFAS “forever chemicals” pose to the environment in 2003, 20 years before it started the process of regulating the chemicals, it can be revealed.

In a 200-page report [obtained by the Ends Report](#) via a freedom of information request and shared with the Guardian, consultants commissioned by the Environment Agency conducted an environmental review of firefighting foams with a “particular emphasis on their fluorosurfactant content”.

Fluorosurfactants are a type of [PFAS](#) - a group of about 10,000 chemicals linked to a wide range of serious illnesses, including certain cancers. They are now known as “forever chemicals” because they do not break down in the environment.

The report, which was never made publicly available, was intended for use to formulate Environment Agency policy “in order to minimise environmental harm arising from the use of firefighting foams”.

The introduction to the report says: “When firefighting foams are released into the environment, whether it is through emergency use, training exercise or accidental spills, they may have an adverse effect on local environmental conditions and resident organisms.”

More than 20 years later, firefighters in the UK are only now [starting to realise](#) that they have spent decades being exposed to these toxic chemicals, and residents of a town that is [home to a major manufacturer](#) of the foams are asking why the Environment Agency did not warn them about the long-term health and environmental impact of the chemicals.

Around the world, the net has been tightening around PFAS. The US recently introduced strict limits on six PFAS chemicals regularly found in drinking water, and the EU is planning to restrict the use of about 10,000 PFAS. However, in England and Wales there are no specific standards for PFAS in drinking water regulations, and in the UK only two types of PFAS - PFOS and PFOA - are regulated. The Health and Safety Executive launched a consultation on plans to restrict the use of PFAS in firefighting foams in April this year.

Having reviewed the product data sheets of the three firefighting foam producers located in the UK at the time - which included Angus Fire, whose factory is located in Bentham in North Yorkshire, the most [PFAS-polluted place known in the UK](#) - the report authors concluded that a number of the constituents in the foams were “toxic, persistent and possibly bioaccumulative”.

Therefore, they said, there “appears to be a discrepancy” between the general low toxicity and biodegradability of the final product and the persistence of the foam

constituents.

The report goes on to explain that this is probably because these chemicals are present in low concentrations. However, the authors wrote that if these “minor constituents persist and/or bioaccumulate ... they may have a long-term effect on the environment even after the cessation of firefighting operations”.

They added: “In such circumstances the constituents of foams may pose a chronic threat to aquatic organisms.”

Responding to the report, Dr Shubhi Sharma, of the charity Chem Trust, said: “It is shocking to hear that the Environment Agency was advised about the toxicity and persistence of PFAS-based firefighting foams, which have been linked to incidences of cancer in firefighters, over 20 years ago. This PFAS pollution scandal is due to inaction and regulatory failure.”

In the report, the authors recognised that in emergency firefighting situations where the primary objective was to save lives and property, the environmental impacts of the foams were “obviously a secondary concern”. However, they stated that “when firefighting foams are used for training purposes, their environmental impact needs to be a higher priority”.

Sean Comber, one of the original report authors, said that a number of years after the report was completed, the Environment Agency announced a type of environmental and human health limit on the concentration for PFOS. He said he “suspects” the 2003 report contributed to the agency prioritising the creation of this quality standard for PFOS.

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Riccardo la Torre, the national officer at the Fire Brigades Union, said the lack of regulation on forever chemicals in firefighting foams was a “national scandal”.

He said: “For decades this danger has been swept under the rug despite their known presence in firefighting foams. Neglect by successive governments and employers

presence in firefighting foams. Neglect by successive governments and employers means that firefighters have been exposed to these chemicals for far too long.”

La Torre said the fact that calls for research into firefighting foams and warnings of the dangers of PFAS “went ignored” back in 2003 was “a missed opportunity to protect the environment and safeguard lives”. “The government and fire service employers must take action to prevent further exposure to PFAS, and provide health monitoring for all firefighters,” he said.

An Environment Agency spokesperson said: “We continue to develop our scientific understanding of PFAS, and our evidence and expert advice has been informing government policy in this area since the 2000s. Alongside the Health and Safety Executive, we are developing a wider restriction on the use of PFAS in firefighting foam through [the chemicals regulation body] UK Reach.”

A spokesperson for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said: “Britain’s nature is in crisis, which is why we have wasted no time in announcing a rapid review to deliver our legally binding environment targets to better protect our natural environment. This includes how best to manage the risks from PFAS. We have also already announced plans to restrict firefighting foams and will set out more detail in due course.”

Angus Fire has not breached any rules in terms of the PFAS it has produced or tested at its Bentham site, and it stopped testing PFAS foams there in 2022. A spokesperson for the firm said: “It should be noted that the understanding and regulation of PFAS chemicals has evolved over time and Angus has always sought to fully comply with its regulatory obligations. Angus Fire customers were able to procure training foam to train their firefighters which do not contain PFAS chemicals.”

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