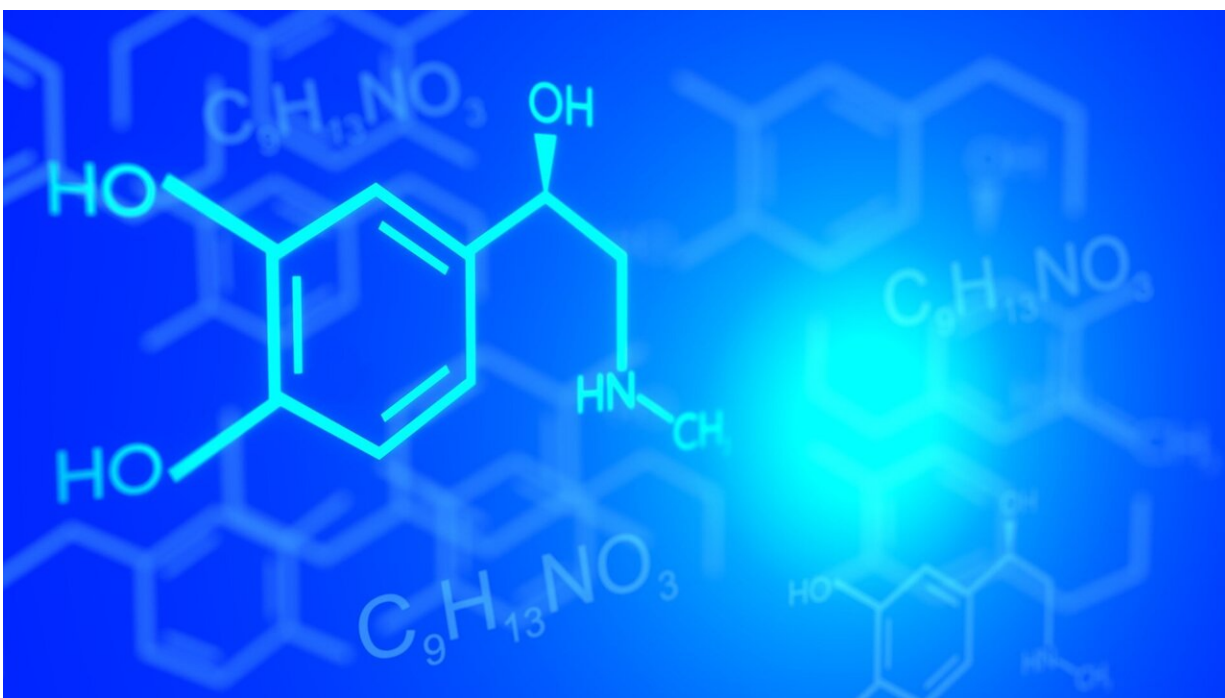


EPA says it agreed to study PFAS toxicity in NC. Advocates say it didn't really

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On Tuesday, the EPA announced it approved a request that it study health impacts of dozens of "forever chemicals" industrial waste detected in the Cape Fear River. But that is misleading, say members of North Carolina environmental groups who filed a petition seeking the studies.

The EPA said that it had granted a petition filed by six [environmental groups](#) calling upon the agency to test the toxicity of 54 per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances identified in the Cape Fear River basin. Scientists have evaluated the health impacts of very few of the 4,700 known PFAS compounds, but those that have been studied are linked with health impacts ranging from [high blood pressure](#) to weakened immune systems to certain kinds of cancers.

In its response this week, the EPA said its national testing plan announced in October would cover 30 of the chemicals identified in the Cape Fear basin, with seven of the substances being tested directly under the category-based strategy. Another nine chemicals could be tested later, and the EPA said that 15 of the substances don't meet the testing strategy's definition of PFAS.

The response has infuriated petitioners from groups including Cape Fear River Watch, Clean Cape Fear and the NC Black Alliance. It is effectively a denial, they say, and simply includes taking actions that were previously announced.

The EPA also did not agree to launch an epidemiological study of PFAS impacts in Southeastern North Carolina, start studying mixtures of the substances that are found in region or immediately develop analytical standards that would help scientists identify many of the compounds in water samples. All are steps that the groups argue are key to understanding both decades of exposure and potential ongoing contamination.

"An administration that has such strong ties to the North Carolina community and understands what we've been going through seems to have lost touch... I'm at a loss for finding any rationale for their denial of this petition," said Dana Sargent, executive director of Cape Fear River Watch. She was referring to EPA Administrator Michael Regan, a

former secretary of the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality.

EPA: PFAS tests let us 'do more'

Regan was the DEQ secretary in 2015 when Chemours' decades-long contamination of the Cape Fear River with per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances became public. His agency hit Chemours with a \$12 million fine, the largest environmental fine in state history, and required the company to provide new water supplies for nearly 3,000 households with contaminated wells around the plant.

Despite those efforts, there has long been a sense that regulators failed to adequately protect downstream communities from PFAS contamination.

In a statement released Tuesday after deciding on the permit, Regan said, "Communities in North Carolina and across the country deserve to know the potential risks that exposure to PFAS pose to families and children. By taking action on this petition, EPA will have a better understanding of the risks from PFAS pollution so we can do more to protect people."

This is the second time the environmental groups have seen their efforts frustrated by the EPA. In January 2021, the Trump Administration's EPA denied the petition. The groups asked the EPA to re-open the petition in March, and the EPA agreed to do so in September.

Bob Sussman, a former EPA deputy administrator who is representing the petitioners, said in a written statement that the federal agency can compel the requested studies in order to better understand how the chemicals impact people and the environment.

"It is tragic that EPA is failing to use the authority it has to assure that manufacturers pay for essential testing on dangerous chemicals that are

in the drinking water and blood of hundreds of thousands of North Carolinians. EPA is putting the financial interests of industry ahead of protection of devastated front-line communities," Sussman wrote.

An approach with 'limited value'

Most of the chemicals and mixtures identified in the petition will be evaluated using computational models under the EPA's testing plan. That approach would have "limited value" to people exposed to PFAS, according to a letter dozens of scientists signed in support of the petition.

Several scientists with North Carolina ties signed the letter, including Linda Birnbaum, the former director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and National Toxicology Program, and Carolyn Mattingly, the head of N.C. State's biological sciences department.

Health impacts can change based on how the PFAS interact with each other, petitioners argue. They proposed studying mixtures that are found in communities downstream of Chemours, in the blood of area residents and in the facility's emissions and discharges.

"We need to understand what these things are doing in the real world," Sargent said.

The petitioners also asked the EPA to require Chemours to fund an epidemiological study of the downstream communities. DuPont, which built and ran the Chemours plant for decades, was required to undertake a similar effort in Parkersburg, West Virginia, after the company's plant there exposed residents and the ecosystem to several PFAS. Some of those were phased out after their dangers became public knowledge.

"We've all been contaminated for at least 40 years, and we have so much

knowledge here that can be gained from this community, by an epidemiological study of this community, that can support PFAS research across the entire globe," Sargent said.

The EPA's letter to petitioners said it is "contributing to and reviewing" human studies and is considering how to help or expand those efforts.

During an October visit to Raleigh to announce the EPA's PFAS Action Plan, Regan told The News & Observer that testing for PFAS by categories would be used to address some of the unknowns about the thousands of PFAS compounds.

"We know that the industry is going to be prepared," Regan said in October. "And we're going to follow the science, we're going to follow the law and we're going to move as aggressively as we can, looking at these categories in a way that we can produce durable regulations that are not legally vulnerable."

In response to the EPA's decision, Lisa Randall, a Chemours spokeswoman, wrote, "Chemours supports national, industry-wide PFAS-related regulatory and testing requirements that are data-driven and based on the best available science. In this regard, the EPA's National PFAS Testing Strategy and participation of all manufacturers is important to a complete, holistic evaluation of PFAS compounds."

The co-petitioners have been meeting throughout the holidays to discuss next steps, Sargent said, but weren't ready to announce them publicly.

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