

Navy looks to test drinking wells for potential 'forever chemicals' from Chesapeake base

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Nicole Jones read a poster's laundry list of health effects from drinking water contaminated by chemicals found in firefighting foam: high cholesterol, changes in liver enzymes, preeclampsia in pregnant women,

low infant birth weight and cancer.

Jones and her husband read the poster at a public meeting organized by the Navy to inform residents that decades ago, toxic "forever chemicals" had potentially contaminated groundwater at the St. Juliens Creek Annex in Chesapeake and trickled into nearby neighborhoods. About a dozen [community members](#) came to G.A. Treakle Elementary to find out about free sampling for drinking wells in the affected area.

The sampling, which officials said will take place over the next few weeks, will look for certain per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances that might be present in drinking wells as a result of the Navy's and fire training academy's past use of firefighting foam on base.

Per- and [polyfluoroalkyl substances](#)—or PFAS—are a class of compounds used to make products resistant to water, stains and grease. The military contributed to the pollution of PFAS with its use of firefighting foam laced with the chemicals. The foam was used during military training exercises in the '50s, but has since been limited to emergency situations, meeting organizers said. The substances have been dubbed "forever chemicals" because most do not degrade in the environment.

The St. Juliens Creek Annex sampling is part of a national cleanup effort and is not associated with the installation's Superfund status. Superfund is a federal program that requires the cleanup of uncontrolled or abandoned hazardous waste sites and emergency releases of pollutants into the environment. St. Juliens Creek Annex was named to the Superfund priority list in July 2000. The Navy invested about \$40 million in getting long-term environmental threats under control.

Public concern for PFAS trickling into neighborhoods by way of groundwater grew in 2023 when the Environmental Protection Agency

recommended a national standard for [drinking water](#) contaminated with the chemicals. Its proposed rule outlines that drinking water contaminated with PFAS should have a concentration level much further below the agency's previous guidance of 70 parts per trillion to be considered safe.

Following the EPA's proposed regulation, the Department of Defense in September launched investigations into more than 700 facilities suspected of having contaminated the ground with PFAS that are threatening to pollute drinking water for nearby communities. The September briefing detailed that about one-third of the facilities had been investigated and that "forever chemicals" are trickling out of at least 245 U.S. military bases.

A site inspection was completed at St. Juliens Creek Annex in late 2023. Officials said Tuesday that 27 groundwater samples were collected on base during the inspection. Of those, 21 water samples were found to have PFAS properties above 70 parts per trillion.

"We really want to educate, answer questions and schedule a time to sample those wells," Capt. Jip Mosman, commanding officer of Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth, said about the purpose of the public gathering.

The Navy worked with the EPA, the Virginia departments of environmental quality and health and the city of Chesapeake to identify residents living within one mile of the annex. Postcards and letters were mailed out to invite residents to the public gathering to learn more about the substances that may be in their drinking water.

Jones, a resident of the Brentwood neighborhood, received two postcards each for three properties she owns within the sampling area. There are two water wells between her three properties, but Jones said her

properties are on city water and the wells are not drinking water wells.

The postcards Jones received, which she shared with The Virginian-Pilot, read: "Although the property you rent is within the sampling area, we do not need to sample your drinking well. We believe the property either uses public drinking water or does not have a drinking water well."

But Jones said she felt the need to attend Tuesday because she has concerns.

"We fill our swimming pool with the well water every summer. Our kids swim in that," Jones said. "And we water our vegetable garden with the well water, and then we eat the vegetables. Do we know what the impacts of that are?"

Jones' home has been in her family since 1938. Four generations of her family, she said, have lived in the house.

"If there is some impact, it is going to be generational," Jones said. "And that is true for 80% of the people who live in this neighborhood."

Semi-circling the inside of the elementary school gymnasium were a dozen poster boards designed to help inform the public. Jones took her time at each, asking a handful a questions and taking notes on her phone.

"What would make it so that these issues matriculate to this neighborhood?" Jones asked a representative at one of the displays as she pointed to the Brentwood area.

"During the course of our studies, we did identify an area of groundwater flow that would point to the possibility for contamination to move off the installation and into this neighborhood," said Cecilia Landin, spokesperson for the Mid-Atlantic Naval Facilities Engineering

Command.

The groundwater, Landin said, flows into surface water, such as the Elizabeth River or St. Juliens Creek. Both bodies of water, she said, had not been tested by the Navy yet. Landin was among the project team members available to talk one-on-one with residents.

"We have identified that we did release it to the environment, and we are moving into the next phase of investigation, which we will assess migration pathways, and if needed, we will go into the next phase," Landin said.

The national cleanup effort is in the first stage of a process outlined by the Environmental Protection Agency. At this time, officials said Tuesday they are solely focused on identifying contaminated drinking wells. Once the extent of exposure has been identified, the EPA will work with the Navy and relevant agencies to determine a cleanup plan.

"This is a comprehensive process and will take some time," said a poster in the gym.

Jones was ultimately unable to sign up to have her water wells tested because they are not drinking wells. A representative on hand to answer questions told Jones it would cost around \$1,500 out-of-pocket for her to pursue testing on her own.

"They are only concerned with the drinking water, but it makes me think it is potentially hazardous on the ground, too. If it is that much of a chemical, I don't understand how it can't be hazardous to be consistently touching it on a daily basis—washing clothes, pressure washing our house, filling our pool," Jones said. "How do you not absorb it through your skin?"

If [water samples](#) show above 70 parts per trillion PFAS concentration, the Navy will provide bottled water to the residents at the affected property within 24 hours.

Aside from St. Juliens Creek Annex, investigations into 10 Hampton Roads installations are planned or have already begun, according to the Department of Defense.

The installations include: Naval Security Group Activity Northwest in Chesapeake; Navy Fleet Logistics Center in Norfolk; Norfolk Naval Shipyard and Defense Fuel Support Point Craney Island, both in Portsmouth; Naval Air Station Oceana, Dam Neck and Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story, all in Virginia Beach; Naval Weapons Station Cheatham Annex near Williamsburg; and a Navy munitions command in Yorktown. An investigation into Joint Base Langley-Eustis on the Peninsula is also underway.

The investigation into off-base drinking water adjacent to Naval Air Station Oceana and Naval Support Activity Hampton Roads has already been completed, according to a poster at the open house. Water samples near Oceana were found to have PFAS properties above 70 parts per trillion.

Representatives at Tuesday's open house declined to answer questions about investigations at other locations.

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