NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT

Fact Sheet

PRESENCE OF PER- AND POLYFLUOROALKYL SUBSTANCE (PFAS) IN RAPID CREEK AND LUDMILLA CREEK

In February 2016, initial testing of the waterways around the Darwin Airport was undertaken by the Department of Health and the NT Environment Protection Authority (NT EPA), which identified the presence of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, known as PFAS.

These substances have been used around Australia and the world as effective firefighting foams. The NT Fire Rescue and Emergency Services stopped the use of PFAS in the early 1990s. PFAS is also common in household products such as non-stick cookware, fabric stain protection and in some food packaging.

The Northern Territory has been proactive in local investigations, to monitor local water supplies to determine any risks to people and environment.

In June 2016, the Department of Health commissioned Charles Darwin University to undertake an independent study into the levels of PFAS in Rapid and Ludmilla Creeks.
CDU's study involved Senior Rangers from the Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation collecting samples of aquatic foods and sediment and the University of Queensland analysing the samples.

The results of the study are in the Report released today.

Is Rapid Creek and Ludmilla Creek suitable for public use?

Yes. Rapid Creek can be continued to be used for recreational purposes.

The Chief Health Officer has previously advised that creek water is not suitable for drinking water due to fluctuating microbiological levels.

Is PFAS in the aquatic foods? Is there a risk to our health?

The study found that, compared to a pristine remote site, that there are elevated levels of PFAS present in the periwinkles and long bums in these creeks. However, these levels of PFAS pose a low risk to public health.

If these foods are eaten in normal quantities, the risk to health is very low and well within acceptable guidelines. Larrakia Nation provided estimates of the average (normal) consumption of the foods by the local indigenous people based on its usual availability which are included in the report.

Is any further testing being done?

Further testing is already underway as Stage 2 of this study, specifically looking at fish, crabs and prawns in and around Darwin creek, Darwin harbour and pristine control sites.

This testing will continue over the coming months with several government agencies involved. The complete analysis should be completed in 4 months by the University of Queensland and the results will be made public once the final report is received.

Are you warning the public about the health risks?

Yes. Signs will remain in place as a precaution to advise the public not to consume fish or shellfish from these creeks till the Stage 2 report has been completed.

What is the source of PFAS in these creeks?

PFAS can enter the natural environment through runoff from urban and industrial sites where PFAS has been used and through the sewerage system. The major source of PFAS in these creeks appears to be from runoff from the vicinity of Darwin International Airport and RAAF Base Darwin, though investigations are continuing.

Who is monitoring the PFAS situation?

The Northern Territory has formed a PFAS interagency working group to identify, investigate and manage any risks of PFAS to the environment and human health.
The working group includes NT EPA, NT Department of Health, Power and Water Corporation, Australian Defence Force, NT Airports, Department of Environment and Natural Resources, NT Department of Primary Industry and Resources, Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services, Airservices Australia and NT Worksafe.

The full CDU report and summary is available at the NT Environmental Protection Authority website at: https://ntepa.nt.gov.au/

Further advice on PFAS is also available from the Commonwealth Department of Health website at: http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/health-pubhlth-publicat-environ.htm