Group testing Maine waterways for 'forever chemicals'

Study shows elevated PFAS levels in Androscoggin River

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BRUNSWICK, Maine —

Researchers want to find out more about the presence of so-called "forever chemicals" in Maine waterways.

Beginning this past summer, the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay began taking surface water samples in sections of the Merrymeeting Bay watershed.

According to their report, PFAS chemicals were found at 27 of the 30 sites sampled.

Samples were pulled from areas ranging from Lisbon Falls on the Androscoggin River and Augusta on the Kennebec River down to the bay.

"PFAS is sort of the new kid on the block in terms of toxic chemicals," said Ed Friedman, chairman of the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay. '(PFAS) are used in so many products. So while they're often termed forever chemicals, I like to think of the more as everywhere chemicals."

According to the EPA, PFAS in the environment may be linked to harmful health effects in humans and animals. Methods of removing PFAS from ground and drinking water are still in the early stages of development and can be expensive.

The report shows the average PFAS levels in the Merrymeeting Bay watershed far exceed the EPA's maximum concentration for safe drinking water.

The average concentration of PFOA chemicals in the Androscoggin were at 5.3 parts-par-trillion, more than 1,300 times the EPA advisory level.

The report points to the former Brunswick Naval Air Station as a likely source of PFAS contamination in the water. Chemicals found in the water are consistent with chemical-based firefighting foam that was widely used and stored at the base for years in the 20th century.

The base was labeled a superfund site in 1987, making it a top priority for toxic waste cleanup. Since then, cleanup projects have been underway to contain potentially harmful contaminants at the base, including PFAS chemicals.

Friedman says testing in Merrymeeting bay and other Maine watersheds is an important first step in understanding the extent of PFAS contamination.

"We use the water to recreate in. We eat fish from the water," he said. "A lot of this focuses on PFAS levels and drinking water. But honestly, the biggest problem is when it gets into the ecosystem and is the food chain."