

Maine DEP downplays Brunswick chemical spill risk to private drinking wells

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The DEP plans to ask nearby residents for permission to test their private drinking water wells, but it will not be sampling every single well.

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Fire retardant foam seeps through a manhole cover near Brunswick Landing after a spill early Monday morning. *Meghan Kissling photo*

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection is downplaying the risk to the public water supply and nearby drinking water wells from an accidental discharge of 1,450 gallons of toxic firefighting foam at the Brunswick Executive Airport on Monday.

But a state toxicologist at the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention said Maine does not yet understand the public health risk that might be posed from inhalation of foam. After the spill, the foam could be seen blowing in the wind around Hangar 4, drains and manholes, and nearby retention ponds.

“We’ve all seen the videos of the foam in the air,” said toxicologist Andy Smith. “We can understand why that is concerning to people... As that happens, you can potentially form an aerosol, small droplets, and it is the small droplets that people can inhale.”

Smith is working with the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, two federal public health agencies, to better understand the risk for those who might have inhaled aerosolized firefighting foam droplets.

Previous water testing conducted at the former Brunswick Naval Air Station, which closed in 2011 and is now home to hundreds of residents and businesses, shows no definitive link between the contamination the Navy left behind at the former 3,100-acre base and nearby drinking water wells, according to DEP.

“Many samples have been taken at this location over the past several years as part of the ongoing federal cleanup activities,” according to a DEP statement issued on Wednesday. “This data does not definitively confirm a connection between the contaminated site and nearby private drinking water wells.”

The legacy contamination is moving away from the wells, DEP said. But that data is a few years old now.

In what it calls “an abundance of caution,” DEP will take additional samples from on-base monitoring wells and nearby residential drinking water wells – with homeowner permission – to see if this discharge is following the same pattern and confirm it poses no risk to nearby homeowners’ water supply.

But the department will not be sampling every single well in the community, the agency said. Instead, it will take representative samples to understand if the chemicals have seeped into the groundwater, how they might be moving underground, and if more testing is required.

On Monday afternoon, four samples were collected to evaluate immediate impacts to the environment and understand the potential for impacts to groundwater. DEP has asked the contracted laboratories to expedite their analysis, which usually takes a month. The state hopes to get results by Friday.

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The DEP did not address public requests for the state to supply bottled water to nearby private drinking well users. The state does that for residents whose wells test above interim state drinking water limits for forever chemicals left by the state-licensed sludge-to-fertilizer agricultural program.

State and local officials have emphasized that the [public water supply appears untouched by the spill](#).

A public water wellfield near the Brunswick Executive Airport was not in service at the time of the spill. Although there is no evidence the spill reached the closed well, the local public water district won't open it back up until additional testing shows the water meets all state drinking water standards.

“Homes and businesses served by the Brunswick-Topsham Water District can safely use the water,” said Lindsay Hammes, spokesperson for the Maine Department of Health and Human Services. “The BTWD is currently using unimpacted drinking water sources sufficiently distant from the foam discharge.”

The Brunswick-Topsham Water Department said it increased monitoring of its aquifer on Monday. General Manager Craig Douglas said that foam is unlikely to get into its water supply, but, in a worst case scenario, that it would detect contaminants long before they reached drinking water.

On Monday, 1,450 gallons of firefighting foam containing forever chemicals, or PFAS, that are known to be harmful to human health [were discharged](#) from a malfunctioning fire suppression system in place to smother high-intensity fuel fires inside Hangar 4 at the Brunswick Executive Airport.

It is unknown why the system faltered; Brunswick Landing officials said it passed inspection last year.

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, are called forever chemicals because they can linger in the environment for decades. They are used to manufacture thousands of common household and industrial products resistant to heat, water and grease.

Forever chemicals can be found almost everywhere now, from Arctic polar bears to Maine dairy farmers.

Even trace amounts of some PFAS are considered a public health risk, according to federal regulators. High exposure over a long time can cause cancer. Exposure during critical life stages, such as in early childhood, can also cause life-changing harm.

For decades, military and civilian firefighters used special foam containing forever chemicals, or PFAS, to smother the intense flames caused by fuel fires. While manufacturers can no longer use two variants of the chemicals, large amounts of “legacy” PFAS-containing foam are still out there.

It is unclear what kind of foam was discharged Monday – the more dangerous legacy foam or the newer, less dangerous foam. David Page, a Bowdoin College chemistry professor and Brunswick's representative on the board guiding the base cleanup, believes it is the more dangerous kind.

In 2019, the Maine State Fire Marshal tried to inventory how much of the dangerous foam was being stored or even still used at Maine fire stations, fuel depots and airports, but survey response was very low, leaving the state unsure how much is out there and if it is being properly stored.

Firefighting foam has been building up in nearby Picnic Pond since Monday, sparking concerns that potentially harmful forever chemicals in the 1,600 gallons of AFFF – a foam used in fire suppression systems – will spread beyond Brunswick Landing.

Ed Friedman of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, an organization that works to protect the large bay formed by the confluence of the Androscoggin and Kennebec rivers, said Tuesday that the organization has regularly tested around Brunswick Landing and noticed contamination issues for a while.

“This is just a (symptom) of poor management and a lot of PFAS on the base,” Friedman said. He said the recent spill at Brunswick Landing made the contamination issues of the former base “worse than ever.”

This story will be updated.