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# Brunswick group organizing to do widespread PFAS screening in wake of toxic foam spill

The Brunswick Renters Organization is gearing up to create a database of PFAS levels around Brunswick Landing, highlighting concerns about toxic chemical exposure in marginalized communities and the need to raise awareness of contamination history at the former military base.

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*Kristian Moravec*The Times Record

5 min read

In the wake of the worst toxic firefighting foam spill in Maine’s history, a renters organization is working to better inform the public and widely test for toxic forever chemicals in Brunswick Landing.

The Brunswick Renters Organization is compiling requests for a bulk order of home test kits for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances — better known as PFAS or “forever chemicals.” The aim, it said, is to create a database of contamination levels around the former Brunswick Naval Air Station while raising awareness about the long-running history of military contamination.

On Aug. 19, a fire suppression system at Brunswick Executive Airport’s Hangar 4, a property owned by the Navy and leased by the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority, malfunctioned and spilled 1,450 gallons of firefighting foam concentrate mixed with 50,000 gallons of water. The concentrate — an aqueous film-forming foam known as AFFF — contained a particularly harmful PFAS substance known as PFOS.

When this news came to light, Brunswick resident Peach Cushing said that he and other members of the Brunswick Renters Organization, a group that materialized to address high housing costs and advocate for tenant rights, knew the spill would have extensive fallout for people who live in the area.

Cushing recalled one example that informed this prediction: the 19,000 gallons of jet fuel released in 2021 at the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility in Hawaii. The release contaminated the drinking water for 93,000 U.S. Navy water system users, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

“We heard about a lot of other spills throughout the world, notably Red Hill and Oahu,” Cushing said, also referring to a wastewater spill that happened this year in Oahu, Hawaii. “And after hearing about those, we were like, ‘Oh, wow, this is going to be really bad.’ So, we were trying to think of ways to engage the public that wasn’t already happening.”



Friends of Merrymeeting Bay Chairperson Ed Friedman holds a Cyclopure test kit full of wastewater at Cook’s Corner on Aug. 29. *Kristian Moravec / The Times Record*

The August spill in Brunswick pushed contaminated water and foam into surface water resources like Picnic Pond and beyond, and drainage systems that flush into the Androscoggin River, which eventually flows into the ocean. The incident has also prompted an ongoing remediation effort and PFAS monitoring of private wells located near the base.

Why would a renters organization get involved in the first place? Cushing said the decision harkens back to a long-running practice of marginalized people being put in “compromising” housing situations.

Incidents like what happened this year in Brunswick have been going on for decades, Cushing said, and Brunswick Landing in particular has a long track record of contamination. The EPA placed the site on the Superfund program’s National Priorities List in 1987. The base closed in 2011 and has since been in the midst of a massive redevelopment push, bringing in businesses and numerous housing developments.

Cushing noted that there are many residents, including New Mainers and asylum-seekers who have moved into newly built housing on the Landing, who may not be aware of the long history of soil and water contamination the neighborhood.

“It’s such a trend of putting poor people and marginalized people by, like, dump sites,” Cushing said. “This is always how it happens . . . but it’s a trend that should be top of mind, especially with the demonization of the New Mainers by the hate groups in town.”

The group plans to utilize the affordability of Cyclopure testing kits — an at-home PFAS-screening option that can be ordered online — to collect data in and around the former Naval Air Station. It also plans to share results with Brunswick Area Citizens for a Safe Environment, a nonprofit corporation established decades ago to address issues related to the toxic waste sites at the Naval Air Station in Brunswick.

Cyclopure has been touted as a more financially viable PFAS screening method.

The EPA has multiple PFAS drinking-water testing methods for which accredited labs can get certified, and a handful of labs in Maine have certification. The Maine DEP, however, estimates the prices for just a single PFAS test at a certified lab can range from \$250-\$450, though pricing can also increase with short turnaround times and other factors, such as the material tested.

The entity is testing homes with private wells in certain regions of the neighborhood as part of its mitigation effort. First tests for a baseline read were done in September, and the next testing round is expected in December.

At \$79, Cyclopure water-testing kits have been touted as a more viable alternative because, though they are not cheap, they can be purchased more often in between certified screenings if needed or used to get a sense of exposure in areas not slated for DEP monitoring.

Cyclopure's website states that its testing kits screen for 55 PFAS compounds, including the 40 compounds screened for in the Environmental Protection Agency's most stringent test, known as Method 1633. The Chicago-based company said that while it is not a certified testing lab, its alternative testing kits provide accurate results.

In the past, some Maine scientists have pointed to Cyclopure as a useful resource for those concerned of contamination at Brunswick Landing. This same test kit is also used frequently by Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, a nonprofit that works to protect and monitor resources in the bay.

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In a bulk order, Cushing said that what the group plans to purchase so far comes with a 10% discount. The hope is to have more concerned residents hop on board to potentially pass on savings. The order is also not limited to those who only live on the former base, as Cushing noted that he would not be surprised if other parts of town might be dealing with contamination.

Contact [brunswickrentersorg@gmail.com](mailto:brunswickrentersorg@gmail.com) for more information on the Cyclopure test bulk order.

Those with PFAS testing questions can email [pfas.dep@maine.gov](mailto:pfas.dep@maine.gov). For more information about spill updates, visit Brunswick Landing website's FAQ page about the spill at [brunswicklanding.us/aff-hangar-4-faq/](http://brunswicklanding.us/aff-hangar-4-faq/).