

Maine DEP identifies 34 towns with high-priority sites PFAS chemicals testing

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AP

In this Thursday Aug. 15, 2019 photo, hay dries after a recent cut at Stoneridge Farm in Arundel, Maine. The farm has been forced to shut down after sludge spread on the farm land was linked to high levels of PFAS in the milk.

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection on Friday released a list of 34 towns where staff will soon start looking for contamination with so-called PFAS chemicals. The testing is part of a years-long plan targeting sites where sludge, septic tank sewage and industrial waste was spread as fertilizer. Kevin Miller reports.

Staff within Maine's environmental and agricultural agencies have been working for months on plans to test more than 700 sites potentially contaminated with PFAS. The chemicals have been used for decades in various household products. But some types of PFAS have been linked to serious health problems and the so-called forever chemicals have turned up on several Maine dairy farms that use sludge as fertilizer.

Patrick MacRoy, deputy director of the group Defend Our Health, gave the DEP credit for taking the first steps to identify and test on high-risk sites. But MacRoy wants the department to put active farms at or near the top of that priority list.

"The challenge remains figuring out how to assure that lands currently being used for farming is tested," he said. "The guidance issued by DEP today does not clarify how they're going to prioritize making sure our food supply is not contaminated with PFAS."

The 34 towns on the priority testing list run the gamut from small rural communities like Littleton in Aroostook County and Brooks in Waldo County to cities like Westbrook and Lewiston. All of the Tier 1 sites received at least 10,000 cubic yards of sludge likely to contain PFAS, and all are within a half-mile of homes. But before any testing can happen, the DEP will need landowner permission to collect samples.

The DEP reviewed decades of licenses and sludge application records to compile the list of 34 communities where staff hope to conduct investigations at specific sites.

“Each site typically includes multiple locations or ‘fields’ and may also cross district, town, and even county boundaries,” the DEP wrote Friday in a bulletin to members of the Legislature on the Tier 1 sites and statewide investigation. “Some sites may have also been used by multiple generators meaning that sludge from several different sources was sometimes land applied at the same site.”

The 34 towns that have sites with high-priority testing sites are:

Albion	Auburn
Benton	Bowdoinham
Brooks	Canaan
Charleston	Chelsea
Corinna	Corinth
Dayton	Exeter
Fairfield	Gorham
Gray	Houlton
Jackson	Knox
Leeds	Lewiston
Littleton	Ludlow
Minot	Palermo
Presque Isle	St. Albans
Sidney	Skowhegan
South Windham	Thorndike
Unity	Unity Township
Westbrook	Winn

Earlier this week, DEP officials told members of the Maine Board of Environmental Protection that they are close to wrapping up a PFAS investigation in the town of Fairfield where some of the most serious contamination issues in Maine have been discovered. In the summer of 2020, random samples of retail milk had slightly elevated levels of PFAS. Officials with the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry were able to trace the milk to its source: a Fairfield dairy farm whose milk subsequently tested more than 150 times the state’s standard.

That investigation has since expanded to several other nearby towns, including Unity and Oakland, where agricultural fields were also fertilized with sludge from the same source or sources used by the Fairfield dairy farm. A total of 191 wells or water sources have been found to contain PFAS levels above the 20 parts per trillion standard that the state recently adopted for drinking water. The state has installed 125 water filtration systems – with additional installations pending – for businesses and homeowners with wells that tested above the state standard.