

# Toxic foam spreads to pond in wake of Brunswick chemical spill

<https://www.pressherald.com/2024/08/20/toxic-foam-spreads-to-pond-in-wake-of-brunswick-chemical-spill/>

Foam has been building up in ponds and billowing through the air near Brunswick Landing since 1,600 gallons of fire-suppressing foam was accidentally released in a system malfunction at Hangar 4 at Brunswick Landing on Monday.

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Firefighting foam from a fire suppression system that malfunctioned inside a large airport hangar at the former Brunswick Naval Air Station Monday on the ground near Picnic Pond in Brunswick on Tuesday morning. The accidental discharge of 1,600 gallons of firefighting foam concentrate containing dangerous “forever chemicals” has alarmed some residents. *Photo by Steve Walker/ Brunswick Topsham Land Trust*

The local water district has shut down a public water source near the site of Monday's chemical spill at Brunswick Landing and will not reopen it until tests show the levels of harmful forever chemicals in the drinking water fall within allowed regulatory limits.

"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 discharged firefighting foam is believed to contain forever chemicals, or PFAS. Even trace amounts of some PFAS, which are used in many common industrial and household products, are now considered a public health risk and can be linked to several cancers and immune problems, federal regulators say.

While the public water supply is being insulated, no such reassurances were forthcoming for those who live near the 3,100-acre former Brunswick Naval Air Station and draw their drinking water from private wells. Many want to know if they should be taking precautionary measures or buying bottled water.

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection, which has had staff at the spill since Monday, is evaluating potential impacts to nearby private drinking water wells, said Deputy Commissioner David Madore. The agency will be developing a sampling plan, he said.

The Maine Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends the public avoid contact with white foam that has made its way into nearby waterways, and not eat fish from nearby waters, including Picnic Pond, Merriconeag Stream, and Mere Brook, while officials evaluate potential impacts to the watershed.

Maine DEP has collected samples of the 1,600 gallons of firefighting foam accidentally discharged from the malfunctioning fire suppression system inside Hangar 4 at the Brunswick Executive Airport, Madore said. Test results should be available in a few days.

For the remainder of this week, the DEP will turn its attention to the impacted retention ponds and other potential waterbodies on or near the former base, which was closed in 2011 and handed over to Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority. The waters will be subjected to additional testing and inspections by DEP.

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.

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.



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Brunswick Town Hall said that it was waiting to receive a report from the Department of Environmental Protection and did not comment further on the appearance of foam in the pond. Locals shared photos of the foam building up on the surface of Picnic Pond, which was covered in snow-white suds.

## **BILLOWING FOAM**

At the Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust office on Neptune Drive, Executive Director Steve Walker said foam was billowing out of the pond.

“I got to work about 8:30 this morning and the shoreline of Picnic Pond looked like someone had taken a huge bubble bath,” he said.

He walked down to the water and found a big black pipe that looked like it was connected to the storm drainage system pumping out foam into the pond. He said foam went airborne later in the morning and, around noon, a glob of foam landed on his windshield as he was driving, more than half a mile from his office.

He said that one person came down to inspect the pond around 1 p.m., but a cleanup crew did not arrive until 3 p.m. and left not long after. He said the mess has not yet been cleaned up and foam was still blowing around.



Fire-retardant foam from Monday's spill at Brunswick Executive Airport continued to float on the wind off Neptune Drive on Tuesday. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

Walker said that neither the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority – the entity that owns Hangar 4 – nor any other authority has contacted the trust about the spill or the pond.

“Typically MRRA gives notices to all the employers on the base, and here it is 36 hours later and we still haven't been notified,” Walker said. He said notices for things like road closures are typically sent to businesses via email.

MRRA confirmed at a Brunswick Town Council meeting on Monday that the only notices it sent out about the spill were a few posts made on its website.

The development comes after a tense Monday night town meeting, in which Fire Chief Ken Brilliant briefed town councilors on the spill. Representatives from the Restoration Advisory Board (RAB), an entity that oversees environmental cleanup efforts at the former Brunswick Naval Air Station, and residents also presented concerns about spreading contamination.

### **‘WORST NIGHTMARE’**

MRRA Executive Director Kristine Logan, who attended the meeting via Zoom, said the incident was the organization's “worst nightmare” and that it had been working with third parties to find an alternative to the foaming solution that was stored at Hangar 4.

Suzanne Johnson, co-chair of RAB, questioned MRRA's handling of the dangerous chemicals and called on the Town Council to act and safeguard its residents by making them aware of the situation. Johnson told the council this situation has the potential to turn Brunswick into the next

Love Canal, a neighborhood in Niagara Falls, New York, that became infamous as the site of a toxic landfill.

The council ultimately passed a resolution calling on MRRA to improve communications with residents and increase reporting about the incident to the council. No specifics of how communications would improve were decided.

As of Tuesday afternoon, MRRA had revealed no new developments about the spill. In an email, Logan said MRRA would brief the media Wednesday to get the most up-to-date information out to the public, but details remained uncertain late Tuesday.

The Brunswick Sewer District said that while it was monitoring systems, it has no process to treat PFAS, and the contaminant will have to go through the standard treatment process. This process entails a separating solids and liquids, sending solids to a landfill, and liquids into the Androscoggin River.

“We don’t know exactly how much PFAS goes out with the water and how much goes with the solids when we separate them,” said Sewer District General Manager Rob Pontau. “But, based on testing that we’ve done in the past, (it’s) probably roughly 50-50.”

Treating PFAS, he said, requires advanced technology that the sewer district can’t afford at the moment. He added that the district is not required to test for, monitor or treat PFAS.

“The key is to stop it at the source,” Pontau said.

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.



Fire-retardant foam from Monday’s spill at Brunswick Executive Airport continued to float on the wind off Neptune Drive on Tuesday. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

Tom Farrell of the Brunswick Parks and Recreation Department said his department is in close contact with the agencies involved in the cleanup and stated that no health hazards or warnings that would prompt the department to take action have been reported.

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 that the organization has regularly tested around Brunswick Landing and noticed contamination issues for a while.

### **‘POOR MANAGEMENT’**

“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.”

The Brunswick Fire Department wouldn’t answer reporters’ questions. The city referred calls to the state. The Maine Emergency Management Agency wouldn’t release an inventory conducted by the Maine State Fire Marshal in 2019 of firefighting foam stored at airports, fire stations and fuel depots across the state.

State environmental officials did not answer questions about past foam discharges at the airport, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency referred questions back to the state even though the property is a contaminated Superfund site that requires long-term EPA monitoring and remediation.

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.

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.

The vast majority of the highest-profile PFAS contamination cases around the country have occurred on or near manufacturing facilities and military bases with airfields. Firefighting foam is the primary culprit in most military PFAS contamination cases.

Since 2003, manufacturers of firefighting foam have been required to use “short-chain” varieties of PFAS that are considered more stable and may have less of an environmental impact. It is unclear what kind of foam was discharged at Brunswick on Monday – leftover long-chain foam or new short-chain foam.

### **Related Headlines**

- [Foam spill spews dangerous forever chemicals at Brunswick airport](#)
- [‘Our worst nightmare’: Brunswick officials grapple with hazardous chemical spill](#)

## All Comments

### 1. Comment by PoopyPants.

4 hrs ago

So if this stuff is deployed for a fire it's just considered what, the lesser of two evils?

### • • Comment by Homebuoy.

6 hrs ago

Heard a very informative broadcast on PFASs in general on local radio WHPW in Harpswell today.

Many studies have reported on how a tiny ( parts per trillion ) concentration of these chemicals in air or drinking water can have disastrous effect on human and animal health.

A business as usual approach to discharging them into the Androscoggin River with what we know today seems outrageous.