

Maine to investigate more than 500 sludge sites for contamination by 'forever chemicals'

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By Kevin Miller

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State environmental regulators are preparing to launch a massive, statewide investigation to find additional “forever chemical” hotspots stemming from Maine’s decades-long use of municipal sludge and paper mill waste as farm fertilizer.

Earlier this year, the administration of Gov. Janet Mills worked with the Legislature to set aside \$30 million to test for the class of chemicals known as PFAS and to install filtration systems on contaminated water systems. The state also will offer assistance to farmers whose land or water is found to harbor unsafe levels of the “forever chemicals” and begin cleaning up sites.

How to learn more

More information about PFAS contamination can be found on the Maine Department of Environmental Protection’s website.

Residents in the Fairfield area can find more information about contamination and sign up for water quality testing at [here](#).

Questions about PFAS and water filtration can be emailed to the DEP: **For health-related questions**, please contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention at 207-287-4311 or 866-292-3474 toll-free in Maine and ask to speak with a toxicologist.

Combined with a suite of new PFAS-related laws enacted this year, the unprecedented level of funding illustrates Maine's aggressive response to chemicals that have been widely used in consumer products for decades and are increasingly linked to a host of health problems. Investigations sparked by one Fairfield-area hotspot have turned up 200 polluted water sources, and counting.

"On this particular issue, not only are the parties united in the Legislature, but I think in the different parts of the government ... it's all hands on deck," said Rep. Ralph Tucker, a Brunswick Democrat heavily involved in PFAS policy discussions as co-chair of the Legislature's Environment and Natural Resources Committee. "The different departments are working together on this."

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The Maine Department of Environmental Protection is now hiring and training 17 new staff members – 11 permanent and six temporary positions – and bringing on subcontractors to assist with the mammoth task of sampling and testing. But first, DEP officials have to decide which of Maine's 500-plus sludge application sites should get top priority for testing.

DEP spokesman David Madore called it "a tremendous task" that is slated to take as long as four years to complete "barring any unforeseen circumstances."



The contamination level in Veronique Plesch's drinking water qualified her for a filtration system for her home. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

"As part of this process, staff are reviewing licenses, historical data and coordinating with representatives at the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry before sampling takes place," Madore said in a statement. "While prioritization is not yet complete, significant progress has been made. The department plans to make public a list of 'Tiers,' or groupings of locations based on priority soon."

PRIORITIZING TESTING

When prioritizing sites for investigation, environmental and agricultural regulators will consider a number of factors, most notably the source of the sludge or waste, how much was spread on the land and the proximity to water sources or other "receptors." The tiered list of sites could be released publicly by the DEP in the coming month, with field sampling slated to start in late fall or early winter.

Sites that are still being farmed will likely receive priority, Madore said.

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“The department will be reaching out to community leaders and residents before sending out field staff for awareness to the community,” Madore said. “The department will also be making the information and general sampling schedule available on its website.”

Per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, have been used for decades in a vast array of consumer goods, including nonstick cookware, stain-resistant carpeting and fabrics, waterproof clothing and grease-resistant food packaging. Certain varieties of PFAS also are key compounds in the flame-smothering foams used at airports and on military bases, as well as by many local fire departments.

The properties that make PFAS so useful in those high-tech products also mean the chemicals do not readily break down in the environment or the body, hence the nickname “forever chemicals.” Some compounds have been linked to serious health problems, including cancer, kidney malfunction and immune system suppression.

Military bases and airports have long been known as PFAS hotspots. But some of the highest levels of PFAS contamination in Maine have now turned up on dairy farms that spread municipal or industrial sludge on fields as fertilizer through a state-promoted and state-licensed “biosolids” program.

INVESTIGATION EXPANDING

The discovery of elevated levels of PFAS in a random sample of milk in 2020 led investigators to a Fairfield dairy farm that had, at the time, among the highest concentrations of PFAS ever recorded in milk. Private wells in the Fairfield area located near fields fertilized with biosolids were found to have PFAS levels that were hundreds or even more than 1,000 times higher than the 20 parts per trillion standard set by the Legislature this year.

That investigation has now expanded to homes and properties in Benton, Oakland and Unity. To date, the Maine DEP has found 191 water sources with cumulative levels of six types of PFAS exceeding 20 parts per trillion. The state or contractors have installed water filtration systems in 125 of those water sources with 42 more installations pending.

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“The testing area is being expanded as necessary based on an ongoing evaluation of results,” Madore said.

Veronique Plesch, an art professor at Colby College, said she and her neighbors had been drinking contaminated water and absorbing unknown amounts of the chemicals. After tests revealed the contamination, the state paid for a new filtration system to be installed at her

home in late August and she is still waiting for follow-up tests results before she starts drinking water from the tap again.

Plesch, who believes the state's 20 parts per trillion threshold should be even lower, fears that the DEP team will discover the problem is widespread.

"I think we've just started seeing what's going on," Plesch said. "I think they are going to find it in more and more places."

The broad, bipartisan support in the Legislature for setting aside \$30 million – a hefty sum for an initiative – illustrates the urgency felt in Augusta to better understand Maine's vulnerability to PFAS pollution and for the state to have the resources needed to respond.

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One of those vulnerabilities could come from Maine's history as a major papermaking state. Paper companies have long used varieties of PFAS in coated paper products ranging from pizza boxes and microwave popcorn bags to disposable or compostable dishware.

A Portland Press Herald analysis of DEP documents showed that eight paper companies spread more than 500,000 cubic yards of paper mill waste on land in Maine between 1989 and 2016. That is likely a conservative estimate, however, because it does not include biosolids obtained from wastewater treatment plants that processed paper mill sludge and wastewater.

BIPARTISAN SUPPORT

Tucker, the Brunswick lawmaker who has been involved in PFAS policy discussions for years, said PFAS hotspots are popping up throughout the state. As a result, lawmakers on both sides of the aisle strongly supported bills setting stricter health standards for PFAS in drinking water, giving the DEP authority to order the cleanup of contaminated sites and allowing property owners more time to file lawsuits against parties responsible for the pollution.

"The money that was put on the table was brought forward by the governor," Tucker said. "The Legislature basically tweaked the laws to make it easier for the administration to get at PFAS."

Patrick MacRoy, deputy director of the Maine-based environmental health organization Defend Our Health, also credited the DEP, the governor and the Legislature for their response to the growing concerns over PFAS. MacRoy said he was impressed with the pace

with which the DEP is filling the newly created positions and was pleased that the department planned to prioritize active farming sites for testing.

Defend Our Health has been pushing for several years for more proactive testing of agricultural products, particularly grown on sites where biosolids were spread. Scientists in Maine and around the nation are currently researching the “uptake” potential of PFAS in crops and livestock.

“In terms of the testing program, I think it is headed in a good direction,” MacRoy said. “We’ll be interested to see what is uncovered and what the scope of the problems are. I think that is everyone’s fear, that we are going to find another Fairfield with concentric rings of problems.”

“Fingers crossed we won’t find more Fairfields,” MacRoy said. “But I fear that there probably will be other problematic areas uncovered.”

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