



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Proof Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE
AND TRADE

Remediation of PFAS-related impacts ongoing scrutiny and review

(Public)

MONDAY, 24 AUGUST 2020

CANBERRA

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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE

Monday, 24 August 2020

Members in attendance: Senators Faruqi, McMahon and Dr McVeigh, Ms Swanson.

Terms of Reference for the Inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade initiated under its annual report powers an inquiry into the elimination and remediation of PFAS-related impacts in and around defence bases.

WITNESSES

TISBURY, Mr Michael, Delegate, United Firefighters Union of Australia..... 1

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Evidence was taken via teleconference—

Subcommittee met at 15:59

ACTING CHAIR (Ms Swanson): I declare open this public hearing of the PFAS subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade for its inquiry into PFAS remediation in and around Defence bases. Today the subcommittee will hear from the United firefighters Union of Australia. I thank the UFUA for a comprehensive submission to the subcommittee's inquiry.

I advise all involved today that these are public proceedings, although the subcommittee may agree to have evidence heard in camera or may determine that certain evidence should be heard in camera. I remind you that, in giving evidence to the subcommittee, you are protected by parliamentary privilege. It is unlawful for anyone to threaten or disadvantage a witness on account of evidence given to the committee and such action may be treated by either house of parliament as contempt. It is also a contempt to give false or misleading evidence to a committee. In accordance with standard practice, the proof and official transcripts of proceedings will later be published on the parliament's website.

I now welcome our representatives from the United Firefighters Union of Australia. Do you have comments to make on the capacity in which you appear today?

Mr Tisbury: I'm currently the junior vice-president of the United Firefighters Union. I'm also the acting assistant chief fire officer for Fire Rescue Victoria, and I've done 31 years service as a professional firefighter.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Tisbury. I invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to a discussion.

Mr Tisbury: Thank very much. As I stated, I'm the acting assistance chief fire officer for Fire Rescue Victoria. I'm also, very proudly, the junior vice-president of the United Firefighters Union. So, depending on who's giving the narrative, I'm either a hero who risks their life by running into burning buildings or I'm a union thug hell bent on world domination. The truth is, I'm just a firefighter who is trying his utmost to protect firefighters, the Australian community and the environment.

Basically, for 20 years governments of all persuasions have kicked this PFAS can down the road. We couldn't wait any longer for governments to act, so we've implemented a number of mitigation strategies. The reason we've done this is that, quite frankly, we've buried too many of our workmates. At every funeral I have had to attend there have been no government reps or chemical company reps there; it has just been firefighters and their families burying their own. So, with a joint union and management initiative, FRV has become a fluorine-free fire service, because we have realised that our common objectives are firefighter safety and community safety and the job is to protect the environment.

In 2011, when there were revelations about a cancer cluster at the Fiskville CFA training ground, we started looking into the situation regarding PFAS. After a lot of lobbying in 2015, there was a Victorian parliamentary inquiry into Fiskville, and the findings were damning. One of the good things that come out of that inquiry was the opportunity for firefighters to have PFAS blood testing to see what kinds of levels we had in our blood. There was a fair bit of pushback at the time to allow us to get that blood testing. The two main reasons that were given included that if firefighters knew what they had in their bodies it would increase their level of anxiety. As a firefighter who's been exposed to this toxic substance for over 30 years, I am being 100 per cent honest with you when I say that our anxiety levels were already through the roof. The second reason was, 'There's nothing we can do about it anyway.' I'll never tell a firefighter that something is impossible, because that's what we do every single day of our lives. So we've focused on solutions to all these PFAS related issues.

In 2016 we got our PFAS blood testing done and the results showed that we had extraordinarily high PFAS levels in our blood. Then, in 2007, we completed building a brand new training college at a Craigieburn. It was an ex-caravan park. Prior to building on it we tested all the soil, so we knew there was absolutely no PFAS on that site. In 2017 all of a sudden we started getting PFAS hits. We implemented a regime to test all our trucks. We stopped using this product in 2010, so our heads exploded when we got the results. Every single one of our fire trucks had been heavily contaminated with PFAS, apart from four, and those four were brand new.

Once again the experts said that we couldn't do anything about it, and I didn't fancy going to the Chief Fire Officer at the time and asking him to replace 108 fire trucks, so we worked on developing an appliance decontamination process. After a fair bit of trial and error we developed this 32-stage process, and I'm pleased to report that after a couple of years every single ex-MFB fire truck has gone through the process and every single

one of them are below 1,000 parts per trillion in total sum of PFAS, and a third of them are below 70 parts per trillion.

Once we worked out how to stop exposing our firefighters to legacy PFAS contamination, we had to work out how to get it out of our bodies. As firefighters, we're sick of having the argument about what a safe level or an unsafe level is. As firefighters, we know that we have these PFAS levels in our blood. It feels like we have a ticking time bomb in our body. We don't know if it's going to go off or when it's going to go off. We just want to get it out of our bodies. In 2018 we came up with this idea for getting PFAS out of our bodies. It's via blood and plasma donation. In 2019 we commissioned Macquarie University to start up a clinical trial. We're about half way through that process now, and I believe that Macquarie is going to be giving you a report on that next week. When we've finished that clinical trial we'll be publicising and sharing the outcomes of that study, not only with firefighters across the world but with all affected communities too.

Last year, based on what we were doing, I was contacted by the United Nations Stockholm Convention and asked to give a presentation to the COP.9. They cancelled the parties in Geneva, which was in April. Based on that presentation we were invited again to speak to the POPRC, which is the Persistent Organic Pollutants Review Committee to let them know what we were doing here in Victoria and also to get our thoughts on the inclusion of PFHxS, the supposed safer alternative to PFOS and PFOA. That was very well received, and some of the exemptions that they were proposing to use, once I'd pointed out—once you get into the first time a firefighter has actually spoken to the UN in relation to PFAS, and a lot of the strategies and exemptions that were to be applied were impractical. They could not be applied by firefighters in an emergency. That was in September last year. In all of this we were also invited to present in Nashville to the Redmond convention, which is the biggest occupational health and safety convention in the world for firefighters. Since then I've been invited by the New Zealand fire and rescue service to present some of our mitigation strategies there. We've been contacted all over by fire services and government bodies all over the world to share our mitigation strategies. We're quite happy to share them, because we don't care what badge you have on the side of your uniform, a firefighter is a firefighter.

Since then we also embarked on testing all our fire stations. We found significant PFAS levels in the soil and in the fruit and veggie patches that we had at some of our fire stations. So right now I'm focusing on remediating those fire stations and also a lot of the neighbouring properties. One in particular is a childcare centre next door to one of our fire stations. We're working with the local council and the EPA to address those and remediate the soil around the property neighbouring the fire station.

ACTING CHAIR: Does that conclude your opening statement?

Mr Tisbury: Yes.

ACTING CHAIR: Excellent. I might kick off our conversation. Thank you very much for that opening statement. I'm particularly interested in a couple of things. Firstly, just continuing on from what you mentioned there in terms of remediating soil around your fire stations, how are you going about doing that?

Mr Tisbury: Each fire station has got different levels. It's about exposed soil. If you expose a pathway, it can get in our bodies. Depending on the particular station and the surrounding environment, either we could do onsite treatment using a product called RemBind, which was developed by the CSIRO and has been used internationally—and it's ironic that I had to go to Europe to find out about it when it was a CSIRO initiative—or, like with the childcare centre, we could do a top scrape and remove the topsoil. We'd have that treated offsite and we'd put down RemBind first then a geofab, clean fill and fresh tanbark on top under the playground equipment.

ACTING CHAIR: Excellent. There is one thing we are particularly interested in. You presented to the Stockholm Convention and took part in the IPEN panel. Based on that experience, what do we need to do to consolidate the Australian government's commitment to expedite the listing of the hexavalent stream of PFHxS and other chemicals under the convention? How far behind the banning are we here in Australia?

Mr Tisbury: In 2009 the UN Stockholm Convention banned PFOS as a persistent organic pollutant. Australia is a signatory to the Stockholm Convention but it hasn't ratified it. Here we are in 2020 still kicking the can down the road. That's why we've just done what we're doing, because we can't wait any longer. Last year PFOA was also included by the Stockholm Convention. The POPRC is the expert panel that makes recommendations to the Stockholm Convention. PFHxS is supposed to be a safe alternative to PFOS and PFOA. In actual fact it's not. It has been linked to very similar diseases. It has got a longer half-life in our bodies and it's easier to get into our bodies and harder to get out. It was recommended its banning be added to the annex. That'll go to the next Stockholm Convention. The difference between the last two are the exemptions. PFHxS has been recommended to be listed with absolutely no exemptions. I believe a strong reason for that was because those exemptions are

just impractical for firefighters to be able to employ in the real world at a time of emergency. Basically that's about capturing foam. We can't capture it.

ACTING CHAIR: Are we using PFHxS foams here in Australia? I know that PFOS and PFOA have been banned, but are we still using PFHxS here in Australia?

Mr Tisbury: Sorry, Senator. PFOS and PFOA actually haven't been banned. I can still take you to fire stations now that have got PFOS and PFOA. So not only have they not been banned and are still being used but also the PFHxS—

ACTING CHAIR: Right. So you're saying that PFOS and PFOA are still being used in Australia?

Mr Tisbury: Yes, and there's no federal law banning it. That's why we have done what we've done here in Victoria. We've got a policy in Victoria. Basically we're saying to the major hazard facilities: 'We can't tell you what foam product you can have at your site. If it has got PFAS in it—and we don't care which PFAS it is—we're not going to use it. If we're forced to use it in an emergency, you're footing the bill for the clean-up costs. You've also bought yourself 50 brand-new fire trucks and you're going to leave yourself open for any litigation from our firefighters who get poisoned by this toxic substance.' Lo and behold, a lot of them have decided to convert to fluorine-free foam. We've been using fluorine-free foam since 2010. There's a lot of misinformation about the efficacy of the fluorine-free foam. We've been using it since 2010. Every single B-class fire that has been extinguished by us down here has been extinguished using fluorine-free foam, so it works.

Senator FARUQI: Could I ask some questions along those lines as well, if you've finished?

ACTING CHAIR: I'm not quite finished, Senator Faruqi, but I'll definitely come to you because I can hear that you've got follow-up questions. I just want to be clear about this: firefighters in Victoria are currently using fluorine-free foam.

Mr Tisbury: Fire Rescue Victoria firefighters use only fluorine-free foam.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you for that. Defence has stated that it's not going to phase out fluorine-based foams until effective alternatives are available. What recommendations does the UFUA have in response to this view of Defence?

Mr Tisbury: Every international airport currently uses fluorine-free foam in Australia. The majority of the professional fire services in Australia now use only fluorine-free foam. Like I said, we've only used fluorine-free foam since 2010. Prior to doing that, we evaluated and tested various foam concentrates. Nobody cares more about the health and safety of firefighters than firefighters themselves, so we certainly aren't going to make a decision to go to an inferior product that isn't going to provide us the protection and do the job if we aren't 100 per cent confident that it could do it. We stand by our decision that we only use fluorine-free foam.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you.

Senator FARUQI: Good afternoon, Mr Tisbury. Thank you very much for coming in to provide evidence today. I wish to continue along the lines of the use of PFAS-based foams. Mr Tisbury, you said Defence is still using these foams. Do you know how widespread the use of these foams are?

Mr Tisbury: I believe Defence still use it at Townsville and Darwin. I'm not sure about the other sites.

Senator FARUQI: That's alright; we can ask them.

Mr Tisbury: Airservices Australia converted over to fluorine-free foam about same time we did, around the 2010 mark—I think a little bit earlier actually—and I think every professional fire service in Australia now only uses fluorine-free foam, apart from Tassie. I think Tassie are looking at transitioning to PFAS-free foam.

Senator FARUQI: And do you know if PFAS-based foams are still being used in training on those bases?

Mr Tisbury: No, I don't. I hope they're not! The thing about Airservices Australia and Department of Defence sites, because they don't get a hell of a lot of jobs they've got to keep their skill-set up by training. They've got to train like they would in the real world, so they use a lot of foam trying to keep those skill-sets up. Because firefighters in urban fire services are always turning out to fires—and that's a good thing that Airservices Australia don't get real jobs—we don't train as often with the B-class product because we're using it operationally quite often.

Senator FARUQI: Do you know why Defence hasn't? What could be the reason why Defence is suggesting that some PFAS-containing foams will continue to be used within Defence until certified alternatives to existing firefighting foams become available? Are these cheaper? I can't seem to understand this logic. I don't know if you could enlighten me a bit more.

Mr Tisbury: With all of the research I've done it doesn't make sense to me; however, they keep hanging their hat on this milspec—military specification. The ironic thing is the current batches of AFFF don't meet milspec anyway. So, you can look at test results coming out of a lab, or you can look at real-life results. That's what we've done. We used it on live fire. We tested it extensively before deciding to go to fluorine-free foam. Like I said, since 2010, every B-class fire that's been extinguished down here in Victoria has been extinguished with fluorine-free foam, so we know it works. As a firefighter at the end of the hose, I'm not sitting there with a calculator working out how many litres a minute I've got to pump out on the fire; I'm just pouring as much foam product as I need to extinguish that fire.

Senator FARUQI: Fair enough. Like you, I'm very concerned about Australia not ratifying the Stockholm convention on PFOS and PFAS. We understand that the government are saying that they'll have to agree on a national standard to be put in place before anything can be done on ratification, and just getting the standard could take until 2022. I think the deputy chair asked the question, but could you provide us with any recommendation for us to push to make it faster, because I understand that we're one of the only countries that have not ratified that convention.

Mr Tisbury: It's a stroke of the pen. We can ratify it tomorrow. For the life of me, I can't work out why anybody would be advocating for the continued use of a toxic foam product when it's the firefighters at the end of the branch who are repeatedly exposed—and not only when we were standing with our trucks. We were being exposed to PFAS not only when we were using foam but also every time we were using water, because there was cross-contamination between the foam tank and the water tank. It was not just when we were fighting fires; it was also every time we were drilling. We were ingesting PFAS. We were inhaling it. We were absorbing it through our skin. We were getting it through our mucous membranes and in our eyes. I'm dumbfounded that anybody would advocate the continued use of this product when there are safe, viable alternatives. Firefighters face about 4,000 different toxins, some of which are known carcinogens, every fire we go into. This is one we can avoid. There's no reason to continue using the product when, like I said, there's a safe, viable alternative.

Senator FARUQI: Deputy Chair, I have a couple more questions on compensation. Is it alright if I keep going?

ACTING CHAIR: Sure.

Senator FARUQI: Thank you. Mr Tisbury, are firefighters able to access any form of redress or compensation for the types of harm related to PFAS exposure? I'm talking about anxiety and stress as well as the other types.

Mr Tisbury: No, not at this stage. We do have access to presumptive legislation if we contract one of 12 different cancers. I just want to be very clear about that: it's a really, really, really good thing, but it's also something that not one of us ever want to have to access because it would mean that you've got cancer. There's still a debate about whether PFAS causes cancer or birth defects, and what's a safe level and what's an unsafe level. I had this argument back in 1991 with regard to benzene after the Coode Island fire. I was only a junior firefighter back then. We were told, 'It's only benzene. There's no emerging evidence. There's no causation between benzene and cancer.' We now know it's a category 1 carcinogen. Like I said in the opening statement, I've buried two of my mates who went to that Coode Island fire. We were promised the world after that—cancer screening, medical monitoring, tests. I'm still waiting, 30 years later, for the first test to happen. We don't want compensation after we've been poisoned. We want to stop getting poisoned in the first place.

Senator FARUQI: Yes, absolutely. You said that the presumptive legislation recognises occupational cancers and that that's a good thing. As we know, there is still a way to go until people can scientifically prove without doubt that PFAS causes cancer, but we've seen people suffering from it. Do you think things need to change in the compensation scheme? Is it inadequate at the moment?

Mr Tisbury: Yes, it's absolutely inadequate. If we get struck down by one of these diseases or we have kids with birth defects because of what we've been exposed to occupationally, you've got to fight your way through it in the courts. If you're struck down by one of these diseases, you're going to focus your attention on fighting the disease, as opposed to being dragged through the courts. And governments, whether they're state or federal, have bottomless pits of money, and firefighters don't.

Senator FARUQI: But, absolutely, as you say, we know now and we should be using the precautionary principle even if there isn't full proof of damage being done. We know that there is damage being done here, so I'm with you on that. Could you just highlight to us some of the effects on your members of being exposed to PFAS in the course of their work.

Mr Tisbury: We know we've been exposed to this ever since we joined the job. We now know that, even though we stop using it in 2010, we're being exposed to PFAS via the legacy contamination. We had to fight but we won the right to get the PFAS blood testing, so we know that we've got above-average levels of PFAS in our body. We're just focusing on getting this stuff out of our body because, like I said earlier, we feel like we've got a ticking time bombs in our bodies. We don't know if it's going to go off. We don't even know when it's going to go off. We just got the bombs removed from our bodies and then that will hopefully reduce our levels of anxiety.

Senator FARUQI: Thank you so much.

ACTING CHAIR: You'll have to excuse me—I have to attend another meeting—but I've asked the secretariat to send you some of the questions on notice because they're really very important. Would you mind taking those on notice for me?

Mr Tisbury: Yes, no worries.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you so much.

Senator FARUQI: The Department of Defence contracts out fire and rescue on Defence bases to private contractors that employ firefighters represented by your union. I'm just wondering if you have, through those contractors, discussed some of those concerns in this deployment?

Mr Tisbury: Yes, we have. We've got a national PFAS policy, which I am happy to send to you. I am the junior vice president of the Victorian branch. Everything we do here, we share with all other branches including the private sector. Like I said, this is a joint initiative between the senior management of Fire Rescue Victoria and the United Firefighters Union. Everything we're doing, all the solutions based initiatives we are employing, we are not making a quid out of it. We're sharing it not only with the Australian fire services but also with international fire services. There's been a lot of interest, especially coming out of North America at the moment, not only from the fire services but also from the government regulators. So we're happy to share that with everyone because there's no point reinventing the wheel. Like I said earlier, we don't care what bag you have on the side of your tunic, a firefighter is a firefighter and whether you are a member of the Australian community or American community, your life is just as valuable. So we're happy to share everything free of charge.

Senator FARUQI: It will be really appreciated. Thank you so much, Mr Tisbury.

Senator McMAHON: I'd just like a little bit more information about the study that you touched on. I think you said it was with Macquarie University. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

Mr Tisbury: We've taken a look at three cohorts of about 100 firefighters. One cohort will be having PFAS blood testing to get a baseline level. At the end of 12 months, they'll have another test, and we'll see how quickly the PFAS is expelled from the body naturally. The next cohort will be firefighters who are donating blood. That will be every six weeks and that will determine whether blood donation helps reduce PFAS blood levels. The third cohort will be firefighters who are donating plasma, to see whether those donations rapidly decrease the legacy PFAS levels in your blood.

Senator McMAHON: When are you expecting the results from that?

Mr Tisbury: I think it's in February next year. We're about halfway through. Then there'll be six to eight weeks going through all the data, then it will be published, peer reviewed and made available to everyone.

CHAIR (Dr McVeigh): Thank you very much for a very comprehensive submission. The reason that I haven't been chairing to this point is that I'm participating remotely, so thank you for your patience. It's good to get your perspective for us to compare and contrast, so thank you for that. You've stated that the contamination levels at Fiskville were similar to those experienced by various communities around Defence bases around the country. What is the nature of support for those PFAS affected people or communities near fire training grounds that are not Defence owned? From your perspective, are you able to give a quick overview of the sort of support that has been provided to communities around those training grounds?

Mr Tisbury: I would only be able to scratch the surface. I can't go into details, because it's only what I—a number of those neighbours and communities have approached me, because nobody else would speak to them, basically. I'm aware of four properties, I think, that adjoin the training ground that received compensation. They're properties we've bought. They weren't allowed to sell their livestock into the markets. It's obviously affected their financial status and also their mental and physical health. I'm still in contact with one of the families there. They have three young kids, and they're got really high levels of PFAS in their blood. They're waiting on the results of the Macquarie study. They'll be the first people I'll contact to let them know whether it's a goer or not and whether it works. I'm pretty confident that it is going to work, but obviously we need to go through a clinical trial to establish that it definitely does work. That Fiskville training ground was shut down permanently. There is a fair

bit of remediation going on, but that will take years and years to remediate. It will never be opened up again as a training ground. There is significant contamination downstream in the water table in the surrounding area.

CHAIR: You mentioned that some of those families contacted you because no-one else was talking to them. I imagine there was some communication—correct me if I'm wrong—but are you suggesting that it was not very good or not very comprehensive or very limited, was it?

Mr Tisbury: Earlier on in the piece—this is all available in the transcripts, and it came out in the Fiskville parliamentary inquiry—I'm trying to put this politely—it seemed to me, from the outside looking in, that the CFA was more concerned about the reputation of the organisation, as opposed to their firefighters and the community. There were some offers made, to basically sign a non-disclosure agreement, signed right there on the kitchen table without getting any legal advice, and if they didn't sign right there on the spot their compensation would be withdrawn, which some of it was. All that evidence is available on transcript. I can only go on the evidence that was presented to that parliamentary inquiry. I wasn't there.

CHAIR: I appreciate that and I understand that perfectly. Any opinions you're able to provide from your perspective given you're in an informed position, over and above that, was all I was asking for. So I appreciate that.

Mr Tisbury: I have also been contacted by other people who live next door. So what they have told me is third-party stuff. I was also at one conference, in particular, where one of the lawyers who was representing Defence put forward a bit of a game plan about the way of dealing with those affected communities. Quite frankly, I was horrified and got up, said so and walked out. In my eyes, that strategy was disgraceful.

The strategy was: 'Stop having town hall meetings, because people feel empowered when they are at a town hall meeting,' and start having what they call kitchen table meetings. Some of the things said at that closed-door conference—and these are not my words—included: 'Most of the residents around Defence Force bases come from a lower socioeconomic background and a lot of them are unemployed. So just offer them a job. It doesn't matter what you offer them—just get them on the books. That makes them go away'; and 'There are only a few people who really know anything about this stuff, so just keep repeating the same lines—for example, that there's new and emerging evidence, that there is no link to cancer and that there's no proof that this stuff is harmful. Just keep repeating that until people start believing it. If that doesn't work, start signing nondisclosure agreements, start offering compo and don't let it go to court, because strategies that have been used in the past to drag it out through the courts don't work with this stuff, because it doesn't go away and, after a few years, it is still there.'

There were a number of things said that blew my head away. They talked about how, at Williamstown, they had put groundwater pumping stations in. I asked, 'What kinds of results are they getting?' and the answer was, 'We don't know. We probably won't know for 30 years, but the point is that the community think that we're doing something.' That's when I got up and said, 'I can't be part of this.' Back then FRV was MFV, and I said, 'We're focusing on real solutions. We're accepting responsibility, even though we didn't know that we were harming the residents and the community that we were supposed to be protecting. We acknowledge that, yes, we probably have caused some damage, and we're going to do everything we can to rectify that.'

CHAIR: I just want to make sure that I have got the context right. You made those claims about a conference you attended. What was that conference?

Mr Tisbury: It was in about March or April 2018. I was asked to speak about our appliance PFAS decontamination program. It was an invite-only thing. Defence, Air Services Australia and a couple of other fire services were there. There were petrochemical company reps there talking about the PFAS contamination they have around Sale.

CHAIR: Can you recall where that meeting was?

Mr Tisbury: It was down in Melbourne at a Radisson or one of those.

CHAIR: That's fine. I just wanted to get that context.

Mr Tisbury: I can remember that the solicitor's last name was 'Wild'. The only reason that sticks in my head is that I thought that some of the things that she was saying were pretty wild.

CHAIR: As I understand it, defence contracts for our foreign rescue activities on Defence bases to a private contractor that employs individual firefighters, represented by the UFUA. Is that correct?

Mr Tisbury: Yes, that's correct. It's Broadspectrum, I think.

CHAIR: So, in relation to the firefighters you represent on Defence deployment or in those activities, are able to provide our hearing with any concerns or comments about their experience?

Mr Tisbury: Absolutely. Like I said, we're advocating for the discontinued use of firefighting foams containing PFAS.

CHAIR: As you mentioned earlier, yes.

Mr Tisbury: Yes, because it's not a one-off hit for firefighters; it's repeated exposure—time and time again. It's not just when we're fighting fires but every time we're training and drilling to keep those skill sets up. You don't get rid of this stuff out of your body. It just keeps building up. It bio-accumulates and bio-magnifies, which is of particular concern for our female firefighters. It goes up the food chain. If a woman gets pregnant and breastfeeds her child, whatever she has got in her body increases as it goes into her baby. That's why we've been battling. The industry has known that this has been coming. Since 2000 NICNAS has been sending out bulletins every single year giving everybody fair warning that this was coming: 'This stuff isn't good. We don't know how bad it is, but it's not flash, so start to transition away from it.' And here we are 20 years down the track and we've got major hazard facilities and some Defence Force bases still using it.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Tisbury. I appreciate those comments. Thank you for answering my questions and those of my colleagues. Do you want to add any other comments before we wrap up this briefing?

Mr Tisbury: I'd just like to really beg your indulgence. Let's not wait another 20 years to do something. Australia should just sign a ban of PFAS and get this stuff out of the country. There are safe, viable alternatives. We've proven that they work. We've been using them exclusively for 10 years. Every B-class fire we have extinguished has been put out with fluorine-free foam. We're the end users; we're the ones who use it. While serving the community we're the ones who get exposed and, unfortunately, we're the ones who succumb to those illnesses. It would be really good if we could just nationally ban this stuff.

CHAIR: That comment and all of your evidence, Mr Tisbury, obviously will be considered by the committee as we continue our inquiry into this matter. Thank you very much for your participation today. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence for you to review. And, with that, the subcommittee really does appreciate your submission and your evidence today. Thank you very much.

Mr Tisbury: Thanks.

Subcommittee adjourned at 16:43