

# The Rise of PFAS

**Tommy Enright**

Over the past several years, news stories have been popping up about PFAS (pronounced PEE-FAAS), the “forever chemicals” that are being found in drinking water and foods in higher concentrations. PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, get their “forever” nickname due to the fact that they don’t break down easily in the environment, a troubling fact given that they are being linked to a number of serious health issues, including an increased risk of cancer, reproductive and developmental problems, thyroid hormone disruption, high cholesterol, ulcerative colitis, and reduced immune function.

PFAS have been around since the 1940s, in a wide variety of manufacturing processes and consumer products such as firefighting foam, nonstick cookware, water-repellant clothing, stain resistant carpets, cleaning products and more. There are a variety of ways that people can be exposed to these chemicals and at different levels of exposure. People can be exposed to low levels of PFAS through food, which can become contaminated through contaminated soil and water used to grow the food, food packaging containing PFAS, and equipment that used PFAS during food processing.

Drinking water can be a source of exposure in communities where these chemicals have contaminated water supplies. For example, in Marinette County, which has the worst contamination in the state, some residents can no longer safely drink their water due to their proximity to a firefighting foam testing facility, which only ended the practice in 2017.

Several other areas across Wisconsin are dealing with PFAS, including Madison, Milwaukee and La Crosse, and the chemicals have also been detected in wildlife across the state, mostly in fish but also deer liver. The DNR has a list of PFAS Consumption Advisories on their webpage dedicated to the topic (<https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/PFAS>). They also maintain a database of sites in Wisconsin with potential and confirmed PFAS contamination in soil and groundwater.

In 2016, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency established a health advisory level of 70 parts per trillion for PFOA and PFOS individually and combined. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services has proposed a standard of 20 parts per trillion based on more recent scientific findings.

There are not yet any enforceable federal standards for PFAS, nor does the EPA currently require PFAS testing of drinking water. Attempts to do so have been met with pushback from legislators and industry groups who oppose PFAS regulations.

Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce, Wisconsin's largest business lobbying group, has filed several lawsuits against the DNR for its PFAS testing programs for industrial sites and sued over

remediation standards for sites with known PFAS contaminations, complaining that the recommended standards for remediation put too much of a burden on businesses.

As PFAS contamination is a relatively new concern, most public water utilities in Wisconsin have not conducted comprehensive PFAS testing. Midwest Environmental Advocates advises citizens whose water comes from a municipal well to ask their local officials to test for PFAS.

This spring, Democratic lawmakers reintroduced the CLEAR Act, a bill that would give state agencies and local governments the tools they need to respond to PFAS contamination, including funding for testing public water supplies. A similar bill was introduced during the previous legislative session, but lawmakers refused to give the bill a public hearing (which happens all too often in a highly gerrymandered state). Hopefully, with more public outcry, our representatives at the statehouse will give this bill the attention it deserves.

Although WFU has a number of policies related to groundwater quality and quantity, we do not yet have policy established around PFAS. We anticipate they may arise as a topic at the policy discussion at the state convention in January.

*Enright is the Communications & Special Projects Coordinator for Wisconsin Farmers Union, a member-driven organization that is committed to enhancing the quality of life for family farmers, rural communities, and all people through educational opportunities, cooperative endeavors, and civic engagement. Learn more about WFU at [www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com](http://www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com). Dive in deeper on PFAs at [midwestadvocates.org](http://midwestadvocates.org) or <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/PFAS>.*

*Image options:*

*Tommy Enright head shot*

*Graphics - courtesy of Wisconsin DNR*

# What are PFAS?

PFAS are a group of human-made chemicals used for decades in numerous products.



stain-resistant carpet & fabric



non-stick cookware



firefighting foam



fast food packaging

Products that **may contain PFAS.**

# What is Wisconsin Doing About It?



establishing PFAS health standards for drinking water, groundwater and surface water



soil & water testing



researching fish & wildlife



listening & feedback sessions



state collaboration

Additional efforts include a **PFAS Action Committee (WisPAC)** and a **PFAS Technical Advisory Group.**

# Why Should I Care?

PFAS persist in the environment and the human body for long periods of time. Recent findings indicate that exposure to certain PFAS may have harmful health effects in people.



certain types of cancers



thyroid & heart issues



infertility & low birth weight



developmental delays

# What You Can Do...



**Test Your Water**  
[dnr.wi.gov/u/?q=177](http://dnr.wi.gov/u/?q=177)



**Check State Fish Advisories**  
[dnr.wi.gov/u/?q=176](http://dnr.wi.gov/u/?q=176)



**Learn More About PFAS Health Risks**  
[dnr.wi.gov/u/?q=175](http://dnr.wi.gov/u/?q=175)



Visit [dnr.wi.gov](http://dnr.wi.gov), search **PFAS.**

