

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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Opening Statement Chairman Harley Rouda Hearing on “Examining PFAS Chemicals and their Risks.” Subcommittee on Environment March 6, 2019

Today we will hold the first hearing of the Committee on Oversight and Reform’s Subcommittee on Environment.

Our country is at a crossroads. In fact, our planet is at a crossroads. The overwhelming evidence clearly shows climate change and environmental damage caused by humankind is no longer open to debate, nor are the short term and long-term consequences if we fail to take immediate action. For America, it is time to lead by example, just as we have repeatedly done throughout our cherished history. America must unleash its strength, innovation, and commitment to take on these threats. For our children, our grandchildren, and generations to come, I ask, I hope and I pray that our elected leaders will stand together in unison to win this fight.

I’m looking forward to working with Ranking Member Comer, as well as the impressive members of this subcommittee, as a bipartisan force to meet this responsibility.

This morning, the Subcommittee will call attention to the issue of perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, a class of man-made chemicals often referred to as PFAS chemicals. These chemicals are toxic and poisonous. PFAS chemicals are known as “forever chemicals”—they do not dissolve naturally, so they just accumulate, not only in the environment but also in the human body.

The information available is sufficiently alarming to trigger immediate action from this Administration. PFAS chemicals can lead to serious, adverse health outcomes in humans, including low fertility, birth defects, suppression of the immune system, thyroid disease, and cancer.

PFAS chemicals are everywhere. They can be found in goods that we use every day—nonstick cookware, waterproof clothing, and take out containers, just to name a few.

PFAS chemicals have also infected the water supplies of those who risk their lives for our country—our active service members and our veterans—as well as the water supplies of

communities around military bases. DOD's long history of using these chemicals has led to serious water contamination issues in and around military bases. In fact, according to DOD, 401 of the Department's military installations have known or potential releases of PFAS chemicals.

We should all be angry that those who are willing to pay the ultimate price for our country have to worry about exposure to toxic chemicals. We know that Seal Beach, a military community in my district, is one of many that has been affected.

Two of our witnesses today, my colleagues Representative Kildee of Michigan and Representative Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania, helped create the bipartisan Congressional task force on PFAS to advocate for communities around the country whose drinking water has been contaminated by PFAS, and I want to thank them for their efforts on this issue. Representatives Kildee and Fitzpatrick will share with us the stories of their constituents who have been exposed to these chemicals and express to us the urgency of the federal government to act now to protect Americans from these toxic chemicals.

We also have here today Dave Ross, from the Environmental Protection Agency, and Maureen Sullivan, from the Department of Defense. The EPA has the authority to regulate PFAS chemicals, and as we sit here today, it has yet to do so. In 2016, the EPA did issue a non-binding health advisory for two of the most toxic types of PFAS chemicals, PFOS and PFOA, stating that concentrations of these two chemicals in drinking water above 70 parts per trillion could be hazardous to human health. However, last year the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended that exposure limits be set 10 and 6.7 times lower respectively than the EPA's suggested thresholds.

Last month, the EPA issued a PFAS action plan announcing that the agency would consider, consider regulating PFAS chemicals, with no indication of when the process might actually be completed. DOD has taken some steps to reduce exposure to PFAS chemicals in and around military installations and to clean up contamination, and private companies have made efforts to phase out PFAS chemicals in their production of consumer goods. But it is not enough, and we have run out of time.

DOD has stated that any federal effort to contain the spread of PFAS must be led by EPA. But, to put it charitably, it is unclear why DOD feels justified in passing the buck to the EPA. DOD must do everything in its power to minimize exposure to these chemicals in military communities, particularly in light of evidence suggesting DOD's awareness of the toxicity of PFAS chemicals since the early 1980s. And, although this hearing is focused mostly on PFAS contamination around military bases—we cannot and must not ignore the role of large corporations like 3M and DuPont, whose knowledge of how harmful these chemicals are dates back to the 1970s.

We're holding this hearing to understand what has gone wrong, why the Executive Branch isn't taking more serious action to address the PFAS crisis; to ensure that the federal government is transparent about contaminated sites so families can protect themselves and their children; and what federal agencies, Congress, and the industry can do to minimize exposure to PFAS.

In attendance today are Americans who grew up in and around military bases who are suffering due to their exposure to these toxic chemicals. Hope Grosse, who grew up next to the Naval Air Warfare Center in Warminster, Pennsylvania, was first diagnosed with stage four cancer at the age of twenty-five—just a few months after her father died of cancer at the age of fifty-two.

We also have people in attendance here today whose family members are suffering due to their exposure to these toxic chemicals. Mark Favors is a U.S. Army veteran who has sixteen family members—sixteen family members—diagnosed with cancer, all of whom who lived next to the Peterson Airforce Base in Dalton, Colorado. Several of those family members are also veterans.

We also have other veterans, members of military families, and Americans who have gotten sick from drinking water around industrial sites in the hearing room today. This Subcommittee thanks each and every one of you for attending today. We want to know what you have experienced. These Americans, their families, and their communities can no longer wait for the federal government to act.