

Foam spill spews dangerous forever chemicals at Brunswick airport

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https://www.pressherald.com/2024/08/19/environmental-officials-respond-to-dangerous-chemical-spill-in-brunswick/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Large+chemical+spill+in+Brunswick%3B+growing+clean+energy+has+a+cost%3B+Democratic+National+Convention&utm_campaign=PH+Daily+Headlines+-+082024

Officials say a fire suppression system malfunctioned, discharging 1,600 gallons of firefighting foam concentrate – 4 to 5 feet deep in some places – at the former Naval Air Station.

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Penelope Overton Press Herald



Kristian Moravec The Times Record

8 min read



Officials say 1,600 gallons of firefighting foam containing high levels of potentially harmful chemicals was accidentally discharged at Brunswick Executive Airport on Monday. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

A fire suppression system malfunctioned inside a large airport hangar at the former Brunswick Naval Air Station early Monday morning, resulting in the accidental discharge of 1,600 gallons of firefighting foam concentrate that contains dangerous “forever chemicals.”

The spill has alarmed neighbors and Brunswick residents who serve on the advisory board that oversees the environmental cleanup at the former military base, which closed and is being redeveloped as a result of a federal base realignment action in 2005.

“The worst fears that we have had have happened,” said Suzanne Johnson, a Brunswick attorney who is co-chair of the Restoration Advisory Board. “We were worried about a teacup full of (forever chemicals) being released and instead we have 1,800 gallons.”

Johnson said the amount of forever chemicals that has already seeped into the ground under Hangar 4 from previous spills is 10,000 times the federal limit – and that was before Monday’s spill. The town will be dealing with the aftershocks of Monday’s spill years from now, she said.

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[Maine plans to search out firefighting foam containing ‘forever chemicals’](#)

“Due to this catastrophe, Brunswick Maine will now be the new Love Canal of our nation,” said Johnson, who is also a member of Brunswick Area Residents for a Safe Environment. “This is not a little spill of a little contaminant. This is a big, big environmental problem.”

The system began discharging the foam at 5:15 a.m., Fire Chief Ken Brilliant told Town Council Monday. A Brunswick firefighter had to wade through the foam-filled building to manually shut off the four wall-mounted cannons discharging foam into Hangar 4 at the Brunswick Executive Airport.

The foam was at least 5 feet deep at that point, Brilliant said.

The authority overseeing the redevelopment of the 3,100-acre former military base – Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority – said the cause of the discharge remained under investigation Monday night. But state and town officials had a different story: they said the suppression system had malfunctioned.

By the time it was shut off, the system had drained most of the contents of the hangar’s two foam tanks, releasing 1,600 gallons of foam and 60,000 gallons of water. Some of the foam emptied into floor drains that lead to the sanitary sewer system that eventually discharges into the Androscoggin River.



STAFF GRAPHIC | JAKE LAWS

Although most of the foam stayed inside the hangar – which is big enough to hold two 747s – some spilled out into the parking lot. Fluffy blobs wafted in the wind through the early afternoon. That foam appeared to drain into the stormwater system, which eventually empties into Harpswell Cove.

“We take this situation very seriously and are committed to addressing the cleanup with the utmost urgency and transparency,” Kristine Logan, the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority’s executive director, said in a statement posted on the organization’s website Monday afternoon.

The authority is a quasi-municipal corporation created by the state to manage the redevelopment of the former air base. The property includes the airport, more than 750 units of housing, and 158 businesses that employ over 2,500 people.

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection hired Clean Harbors of South Portland to provide containment and cleanup services, Brilliant said. The company arrived midafternoon with big vacuum trucks, containment booms and tanks to start cleanup. It’s too early to say how long it will take, he said.

Crews from Clean Harbors could be seen working on cleanup around 1 p.m. A worker declined to comment on the cleanup efforts, saying they were not allowed to talk to the media.

FOAM SEEPING OUT OF MANHOLE

Brunswick resident Meghan Kissling, who lives on Intrepid Street on the former base property, said she saw foam seeping out of a manhole cover on a bike path that runs along Orion Street just before noon. She did not see any personnel working to contain the spill on the street.

“Because it was windy and rainy, the foam sprayed everywhere,” Kissling said.

She said there was caution tape blocking off drainage systems that were leaking foam. More foam was seen at the airport gates. After learning about previous spills at the base, Kissling wanted to know why measures hadn’t been put in place since to prevent something like Monday’s incident.

Kissling brought her case to the Town Council on Monday during the public comment period.

“We pay taxes as residents of the base,” Kissling said. “I have a Brunswick ZIP code. This is our concern.”

It’s too early to say how much of the forever chemicals will wind up discharged into Harpswell Cove and the Androscoggin River, said Rob Pontau, the general manager of the Brunswick Sewer District. Some of what drains into the sewer district will be removed from the wastewater and landfilled as sewage sludge.



Officials say a large amount of firefighting foam containing high levels of potentially harmful chemicals was accidentally discharged at Brunswick Executive Airport on Monday. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

Town Manager Julia Henze said she needed more details before setting a course of action.

“I’m watching it very closely,” Henze said. “This is still an incident in progress. We need to know exactly what was spilled, how dangerous it was, and how far it could spread before we decide next steps. We do not want to alarm or reassure people until we know all the facts.”

Brunswick Councilor James Ecker has brought up concerns about PFAS contamination and spill prevention at the base in previous meetings, including this month.

“This is exactly the kind of incident I’ve been concerned might happen,” he said.

When the base closed, the Navy pledged to clean up any environmental contamination, but forever chemicals weren’t considered a danger at that time, Henze said. That’s since changed. Nearby drinking wells and streams have since tested positive for forever chemicals, but at levels below federal standards.

An investigation of fin fish in the discharge ponds at the base – including the so-called picnic pond that was a favorite recreational spot for base families – found high levels of forever chemicals in the fish, she said. The state is deciding whether to issue a “do not eat” advisory for those ponds, she said.

A MAJOR ENVIRONMENTAL INCIDENT

David Page, a Bowdoin College chemistry professor, is Brunswick’s representative on the Restoration Advisory Board that has been involved in cleaning up the base since 1995.

Page said concerns about chemical spills have been raised numerous times. Many of the foam systems inherited from the Navy are Cold War-era fire safety systems, which he described as “overkill” for a civilian airport.

Page called Monday’s spill a major environmental incident, and he expressed concerns about management and communication.

“MRRA, since taking over in 2011, has had three major spills of firefighting material,” Page said. One spill in 2019 caused PFOS levels to spike in Picnic Pond, Mere Creek and showed up in mussel samples in 2020.

He said Monday’s spill likely will make levels spike again.

”There’s no reason in the world for that stuff to be there in the first place at this point in time,” Page said.

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, are called forever chemicals because they can linger in the environment for decades. They are used to make [thousands of common household and industrial products](#) resistant to heat, water and grease.

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[PFAS found in almost 1,000 products sold in Maine, so far](#)

For decades, military and civilian firefighters used special foam containing 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](#) at fire stations and military bases.

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.



Workers clean up a chemical spill at Brunswick Executive Airport on Monday. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

The “aqueous film-forming foam” (or AFFF) is so effective at smothering the flames of burning jet fuel that the Federal Aviation Administration requires commercial airports to keep it on hand. The FAA actually requires airports to test their foam-spraying equipment at least twice annually.

‘THE REALLY BAD STUFF’

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.

Brilliant told the council that most of the two 1,400-gallon tanks of firefighting foam in Hangar 4 were emptied during Monday’s incident. Some of it was the old stuff leftover from the Navy, and some was the newer stuff. Page said the foam discharged is known as “lightwater,” and contains PFOS – “the really bad stuff.”

PFOS (which is different from PFAS) is short for perfluorooctane sulfonic acid and is a manmade chemical. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency released toxicity reports on PFOS in April, declaring it a hazardous substance.

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.

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[Even trace amounts of PFAS chemicals pose health risk, new federal advisory says](#)

A review in May by the Restoration Advisory Board found elevated levels of PFOS in fish samples collected both on and off the base. The fish tissue gathered in the study showed levels that exceeded the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention's meal safety level.

Samples also fell under the CDC's "Do Not Eat" advisory requirements, but the CDC has not yet issued a formal advisory.

The advisory board also pointed out PFAS contaminations migrating into public drinking water supplies at the Jordan Avenue Well field in Brunswick.

Maine is halfway through a four-year investigation of 1,100 fields where farmers used state-licensed sewage sludge as fertilizer, unaware the semisolid byproduct of sewer plants was full of forever chemicals. It has spent \$15 million so far to help 484 landowners hurt by its sludge recycling.

The state has dedicated more than \$100 million to address PFAS problems since they emerged in 2016.

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All Comments

1. Comment by jbmaine.

58 min ago

Hope the workers are masking up. Hard to see in the photos. No one should breathe that stuff.

• • Comment by ChristopherWhite.

1 hr ago

Well, whatever else we can surmise from this article, one thing is clear...absolutely none of the military industrial complex players who, for decades, profited from PFAS (which are, we need to remember, commercial chemical products considered licensed, patented, protected intellectual property) will be on the hook for any cleanup efforts...meanwhile many will be forced to either find (which is to say buy) potable water now that many local sources have been contaminated or move, quite possibly at a loss due to the impact on property value.

Our system is decidedly "capitalist" when there are profits to be gouged from consumers, while "losses" for huge corporations inevitably seem to get "socialized" with the cost of damages gouged from middle & working class taxpayers. This continues the "virtuous cycle" that transfers Capital back into the hands of Free Market Innovators & Job Creators...so they can afford the attorneys' fees required to bankrupt THIS corporation (making it impossible to collect damages) while investing in THAT corporation (that picks up again with no "baggage")...while the investors get tax breaks by playing the shell-company game. And thus the cycle repeats anew. Any & every suggestion either for ways to avoid this in the first place or seek REAL restitution is immediately attacked as the slippery slope to become a communist dystopia by those who believe what decades of Free Market propaganda has told them.

What massive marbles the military industrial complex has grown.

- • **Comment by JelloB.**

2 hrs ago

at BIW they dump the used fire fighting foam overboard when they are done with it

- **Reply by rrossi5252.**

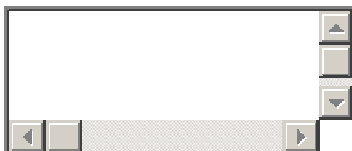
1 hr ago

Is that supposed to be good?

- • **Reply by JelloB.**

1 hr ago

it sounds like it's considered a dangerous chemical spill when we aren't trying to defend our nation from the banks of Bath



- **Comment by jmerrill.**

2 hrs ago

OK, David Page hit the nail on the head: "There's no reason in the world for that stuff to be there in the first place at this point in time."

So, what's the answer? Why IS "that stuff" STILL there after all this time, and with multiple spills? Surely either the municipality of Brunswick or the State can order the MRRA to get rid of all the foam?

A lot of money is being spent to develop the property for uses other than aviation. Why would anyone want to live or work near a site that is periodically contaminated with toxic chemicals?

- **Reply by F. Gump Esq..**

2 hrs ago

Wonder what if anything was in the hangar with this fire suppression system. If the hangar was empty seems like the system could have been turned off until there actually was something to protect.

-



- **Comment by apdl1.**

4 hrs ago

If the foam is so toxic, how come the cleanup crew is not wearing hazmat suits and masks?

- **Reply by Dig Dr.**

3 hrs ago

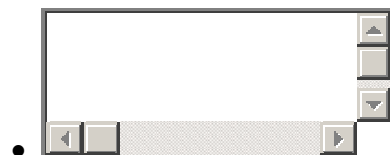
That is exactly what I thought when I saw the photos!!!

- • **Reply by rrossi5252.**

1 hr ago

They probably should be.

-



- **Comment by TreeHugger.**

4 hrs ago

So is this stuff in the Brunswick town water now? Does the Brunswick-Topsham Water District test and monitor the levels in our water supply?

• • **Comment by write is right.**

4 hrs ago

"Even trace amounts of some PFAS are considered a public health risk ... Exposure during critical life stages, such as in early childhood, can also cause life-changing harm."!!

Why has the legislature's Environment and Natural Resources Committee refused to ban these chemicals in mining? Mining will use a tremendous amount of water that can easily become contaminated and harm our environment and our bodies. edited

• • **Comment by lsavage3.**

4 hrs ago

This is the danger those of us who oppose bluShift Aerospace operating rocket tests and launches at Brunswick Landing & elsewhere in Maine have been warning local residents about. While bluShift claims its fuel is non-toxic, it conveniently ignores the fire suppression system that is obligatory as rockets often explode. The resulting fires are highly toxic due to burning plastics, aluminum, etc.

• • **Comment by Randy H.**

14 hrs ago

Thank you for in the informative article and to those willing to be transparent and working together towards a permanent solution. All the best with the cleanup.