

PFAS-laden firefighting foam spill reinvigorates calls for proactive government response

Clean up continues at Brunswick Airport after accidental discharge of approximately 1,600 gallons of foam containing dangerous forever chemicals

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Approximately 1,600 gallons of foam containing perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, also known as PFAS, was accidentally discharged at Brunswick Executive Airport's hangar 4 on Aug. 19, 2024. (AnnMarie Hilton/ Maine Morning Star)

An unintentional discharge of firefighting foam containing high levels of toxic forever chemicals at the Brunswick Executive Airport on Monday has prompted state legislators to call on the governor to immediately overhaul how the state handles this material, which is housed at military bases and fire departments across the state.

“This is like a ‘Silent Spring’ moment for my district,” said Rep. Dan Ankeles (D-Brunswick), referring to Rachel Carson’s seminal examination of environmental devastation from the indiscriminate application of agricultural chemicals. “This is a wake up call.”

At approximately 5:15 a.m. Monday morning, the fire suppression system in hangar four went off, discharging approximately 1,600 gallons of foam containing perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, also known as PFAS, which have been linked to serious long-term health problems including cancer, weakened immune systems, developmental issues, and more.

The cause of the accidental discharge is still under investigation, according to the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority, which manages the airport. Deputy Commissioner of the Maine Department of Environmental Protection David Madore said the cleanup effort remained ongoing as of Monday evening and the full extent of the contamination was not yet known, though local officials confirmed the foam has gotten into the sewer and stormwater systems.

“Unfortunately — I hate to say it this way — when you look at it, it’s a forever chemical for a reason,” fire chief Kenneth Brillant said during a town council meeting Monday evening. “It’s going to be really impossible to really get it all.”

While Maine has led the nation in establishing many [PFAS restrictions](#), both the historic use and continued storage of this PFAS-laden foam remains an issue that local lawmakers, community leaders and researchers say the latest spill has once again brought under scrutiny.

The spill on Monday is at least the third since the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority took over the airport. Separately, there is also documentation of forever chemical contamination in the groundwater and soil surrounding the airport linked to its operations as a former military base.

When asked by town councilors how to reassure Mainers that they are safe following the spill, Brillant pointed to the long-standing nature of the contamination. “The property over there was already contaminated previous to this,” Brillant said, adding that with this spill, the issue is just more visible.

Given the difficulty with cleaning up forever chemicals, Ankeles said the incident underscores why the state needs to take a proactive approach to ensure such spills don’t continue to occur.

Ankeles and his counterpart representing Brunswick in the Senate, Democrat Mattie Daughtry, are finalizing a letter to Gov. Janet Mills, which Ankeles said will call for state assistance to clean up the spill as well as all possible preventative measures to be taken to prevent such an incident from happening again. The Brunswick lawmakers are planning to send a similar communication to the federal government soon after, as well.

The spill and immediate response

By Monday afternoon, the firefighting foam could be seen spilling out of the airport hangar into the parking lot, with large pieces also being picked up by the wind and carried down the road near businesses. Inside the hangar, the foam reached four to five feet deep, according to internal employee communications.

After an electronic communication notified the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority that the fire suppression system had gone off, the authority’s executive director, Kristine Logan, said it looped in a number of state and federal entities to help with the response, including the Maine DEP, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the EPA’s National Response Center

and U.S. Department of Navy. Clean Harbors of South Portland is also providing clean up services.

Officials from several of the responding agencies have said they are unsure how long the cleanup effort will take.

“We take this situation very seriously and are committed to addressing the cleanup with the utmost urgency and transparency,” Logan said. “Our goal is to not only clean up the affected areas but also to ensure that such incidents are handled effectively and responsibly.”

Ankeles and Daughtry, the Brunswick lawmakers, intend to call for the immediate removal of the PFAS-laden foam at the Brunswick Airport, which is also in hangar six.

“I am deeply concerned about the incident at the landing, what it means for our water supply, its impact on the environment and residents in the district,” Daughtry said.

The property was transferred to the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority by the U.S. Navy, after the site was officially decommissioned in 2011. This ownership history has also complicated who is on the hook to clean up the PFAS-related contamination that has occurred through equipment and human error as well as on-base fire training prior to 2011.

“The state can’t wait,” Ankeles said. “We can’t just argue with the Navy and the EPA over who’s in charge of getting this away from my constituents. The cleanup has to be immediate. Just because when you touch it right now your flesh won’t immediately melt, it’s still like a bunch of cancer was just spilled all over my district.”

David Page, the town council’s representative to the Restoration Advisory Board, which is involved with the overall facility cleanup, hopes the latest spill will show the state it is time to take the community of Brunswick seriously from an environmental point of view, and not primarily as an opportunity for development, which he feels has been the case.

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– **State Rep. Dan Ankeles of Brunswick**

Page, who is a chemistry and biochemistry professor emeritus at Bowdoin College, is also concerned about occupational exposure from the spill.

“Even at very low levels, it’s very hazardous,” Page said. “I mean they treat this stuff like it’s just detergent, but it’s not.”

During the Monday evening meeting, Brunswick town councilors also questioned Brilliant, the fire chief, about exposure risks for those cleaning up the spill.

Comparing the cleanup to a fuel spill, Brilliant said, “If someone poured five gallons of gasoline on your driveway and it was just sitting there in a puddle, you wouldn’t walk in it, you wouldn’t put your hands in it, you wouldn’t drink it, you’d want to get it cleaned up.”

“But at some point there’s some exposure to that,” he said, adding that Clean Harbors employs trained responders with protective equipment.

Cleanup limitations

This type of foam, Aqueous Film Forming Foam, also referred to as AFFF, is highly effective against high-hazard flammable liquid fires because of PFAS, but these persistent chemicals also make it highly toxic. As a result, states have started to ban or restrict the use of this fire suppressant — Maine did the latter [in 2021](#).

However, PFAS also make the material difficult to dispose of. For instance, incineration risks failing to break down all the chemical bonds or creating harmful byproducts.

Brunswick Sewer System General Manager Rob Pontau said now that the foam has gotten into the sewer system, remediation options are limited. “We don’t have a treatment technology to deal with it, and that’s probably a long way out,” Pontau said.

There have been recent developments in more effective methods, such as technology called the [PFAS Annihilator](#) that New Hampshire has begun using in tandem with a recently launched foam take-back program.

In Maine, however, this foam is currently stored across the state. According to a 2022 Maine DEP [report](#), 48,000 gallons of AFFF could still be in fire departments, not counting additional gallons on current and former military bases like the Brunswick Airport.

Ankeles said the most important immediate step in his view is to ensure the foam is not located in places where it can get into water systems, and he is open to exploring storage options both in and out of state to make that a reality.

In 2023, Ankeles [proposed](#) establishing a commission to study ways to improve infrastructure and stormwater management at the Brunswick Airport, specifically including ongoing federal and state remediation and safe storage efforts with respect to PFAS. While the plan secured the approval of both chambers, it failed to get enacted due to procedural hurdles with something called the “[study table](#).”

AnnMarie Hilton contributed reporting to this story.