

# Many questions and frustrations, some answers at special meeting about Brunswick chemical spill

<https://www.pressherald.com/2024/08/29/many-questions-frustrations-and-some-answers-at-special-meeting-after-brunswick-chemical-spill/>

Residents raised concerns about the potential for airborne contamination and learned details about where and how officials are testing to gauge the extent of the environmental damage.

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*Kristian Moravec*The Times Record

7 min read



Caitlin Damour, of Brunswick, addresses Jeffrey Jordan, deputy director of the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority, during a meeting to discuss concerns about a toxic foam spill at Brunswick Executive Airport earlier this month. Damour cited a delay in communications that put her husband's health at risk. *Ben McCanna/Portland Press Herald*

Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority representatives faced a heated Thursday night meeting as Brunswick residents and officials got vented and questioned those involved in the recent spill of hazardous firefighting foam at the former Brunswick Naval Air Station.

Jeffrey Jordan, deputy director of the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority, which owns the hangar where the spill happened, said that his organization was slow to communicate with the public in the wake of the spill, but that the property manager was on site quickly. He said his focus that morning was organizing people to manage the spill and arranging the start of the cleanup with Clean Harbors.

A member of the audience interrupted Jordan, accusing him of filibustering to avoid questions. Council chambers were filled with residents and local officials, with around 80 people in the main chamber and dozens more gathered in an overflow room watching the meeting via Zoom. Audience members had to line up to speak about their concerns about the spill and how it was handled.

Council Chair Abby King also pressed Jordan to outline communication from MRRA moving forward. Jordan said that MRRA has an email notification system that people can sign up for. He also said, after additional questioning from King, that MRRA will look into an outreach plan to make sure people are aware of the email system.

One of the panelists, Sen. Mattie Daughtry, said that the Maine Legislature has oversight of MRRA and must submit an annual report. She said AFFF was not mentioned in this year's report.

"This is something I take very seriously and share many of your frustrations," Daughtry said. "... I can assure you that we will be looking at transparency and accountability."



BRUNSWICK, ME – AUGUST 29: Audience members at a meeting in Brunswick pass copies of a town map at the beginning of a discussion about the toxic foam spill at Brunswick Executive Airport earlier this month. (Staff photo by Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer) *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

## **Risk assessment**

Concerned audience members posed questions about history of testing on the base, the risk of aerosolization and whether it's possible to rid of PFAS entirely.

Brunswick resident Hannah Coon said that with her science background and knowledge of PFAS, she believes the problem is “staggering” and that the burden of the disaster is falling on public citizens.

“Let's be clear, the chemicals are called forever for a reason,” she said. “If these chemicals had existed during the time of the dinosaurs they would only just now be breaking down. That's the level of persistence that we are dealing with.”

DEP Toxicologist Andy Smith addressed concerns of aerosol droplets of AFFF, noting that he was working with the Maine Department of Environmental Protection to sample a few sites to confirm whether the foam could aerosolize.

“The question is whether or not in a rain-wind event, that it can be made into smaller droplets, right, aerosols. And those droplets can travel further and they're small enough to potentially be inhaled,” Smith said. “We think it's theoretically possible, but we don't have anything to really be quantitative or model of it.”

He said a sample will be taken from one site where there is known, direct contamination from foam, and another site — a park across the street from Hangar 4 — where there was no report of foam blowing around. Smith said that if an aerosol was formed, this could be a site that was impacted. They are also looking into methods of air quality testing.

Topical contact with foam, mainly hand-to-mouth contact, was another concern, Smith said. and encouraged residents to stay away from the foam and wash hands.

He also highlighted risk of exposure to PFAS through consumption of fish, referencing a recent [CDC “Do Not Eat” advisory](#) based on samples collected in October 2023. Anyone who has been consuming fish, he said, could seek a toxicology consultation.

Smith reiterated that the public tap water is safe to drink. Craig Douglas of the Brunswick-Topsham Water District confirmed last week that water that goes into the public drinking system is rigorously tested for PFAS and has several safeguards in place to detect the chemical before it reaches faucets.

At the meeting, Douglas said that those on well water who wanted to access public drinking water could do so by reaching out to the District. He highlighted that there is also a fill station at the main treatment plant that is open 24/7. All a customer has to do is set up an account, he said.

Amid inquiries about well water safety, Maine Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Melanie Loyzim explained that ground water flows in two directions on the base. At the north end, ground water flows toward the river. The majority of the base, however, flows south and southeast. She reiterated that the DEP plans to do some well water testing in these areas.

The DEP also has a reimbursement program for PFAS testing of well sites that fall under specific criteria , but [homeowners would have to front hundreds of dollars](#) for analysis at a certified lab.

In the case of the Aug. 19 spill, DEP Deputy Commissioner Dave Madore said that one of the criteria for reimbursement of PFAS testing would be to tie any PFAS detections to the AFFF that was spilled. Loyzim said after the meeting that the DEP is still figuring out how and who would determine if that tie exists.



Friends of Merrymeeting Bay Chairperson Ed Friedman holds a Cyclopure test kit full of waster water at Cook’s Corner Thursday, Aug. 29. *Kristian Moravec / The Times Record*

Ed Friedman from nonprofit Friends of Merrymeeting Bay said that those concerned about well water could use cheaper test kits like Cyclopure for screening purposes.

Loyzim said that the DEP has been investigating contamination at the base, which was designated a superfund site by the EPA in 1987, for decades. She noted that she is being careful not to use the word “cleaning” when referring to DEP’s involvement on the base.

“We engage in removal and remediation,” she said, adding that the process cannot happen quickly.

The DEP’s sampling plan for this particular incident includes rigorous testing. Loyzim said that it is testing surface and retention water, as well as streams and Harpswell Cove. She said they plan to test fish tissue and water in the Androscoggin River.

### **Frustration filled night**

The meeting was riddled with technical issues for those viewing it virtually, enflaming frustrations with how information is being conveyed to the public.

Audience members frequently called on panelists to speak into the mic, and a few said they were receiving emails from Zoom attendees that couldn’t hear anything from home. An audience member who was watching from the overflow room at town hall came downstairs and mentioned that the folks upstairs were missing some of the presentations. There was also disagreement over Hangar 6, another MRRA-owned part of the base. Some audience members expressed concerns over an alleged, ongoing leak at this hangar,

which Jordan and another MRRA representative denied. David Page of the Restoration Advisory Board pushed back against MRRA's denial, stating that "it's not, not leaking."

The meeting comes 10 days after a malfunctioning fire suppression system released 1,450 gallons of AFFF — a toxic firefighting foam that contains forever chemicals as PFAS — into Hangar 4 and surrounding areas. The fire suppression system in the hangar, which is owned by Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority, has since been shut down, according to Brunswick Fire Department.

One public commenter called out what he worried was a "disingenuous PR spin" by the DEP, referencing initial test results following the spill that showed 3.2 billion parts per trillion of PFOS — a particularly toxic PFAS compound. [Scientists have since questioned](#) why only the PFOS figure was shown and why it originally shared data as "3,230 parts per million" and not parts per trillion, as is standard for measuring PFAS.

Loyzim said that the reason the information was shared in parts per million as parts per trillion is used when assessing drinking water, and that the DEP shares information within the applicable standard of the material sampled. The sample taken was not of drinking water, she said.

"I understand that you are all comparing them to parts per trillion and to drinking water standards. You should not drink storm water or pond water, and you should not expect that storm water or retention pond water to be potable under any circumstances," Loyzim said. "But If you want this in parts per trillion, we can report them in parts per trillion."

Earlier, she said that the test results released were meant only to give a picture of what was released in the hangar. She also explained she was also frustrated by the limited information.

In attendance were state Sen. Mattie Daughtry, Rep. Dan Ankeles, Brunswick Councilor Abby King, Brunswick Topsham Water District General Manager Craig Douglas, Brunswick Landing Restoration Advisory Board member and retired Bowdoin College professor David Page, state Toxicologist Andy Smith, MRRA representative Jeffrey Jordan and DEP Commissioner Melanie Loyzim. Several other councilors and local representatives, such as U.S. Sen. Angus King (a Brunswick resident), sat in the audience.

The council will revisit the topic and consider a resolution calling for in next week's town council meeting Ankeles said that the Town Council has drafted a resolution demanding cleanup and removal of any and all foam on the base. The matter will be considered at a Tuesday evening Council meeting. Ankeles also said that, at the legislative level, politicians are looking into expanding the states ability to inventory toxic firefighting foam and adopt long-term PFAS disposal options.

The meeting can be viewed on [TV3](#), and materials shared in the meeting will be shared on the town's website, [Brunswickme.gov](#).

## **Related Headlines**

- [Brunswick residents with wells face testing barriers in wake of chemical spill](#)
- [Scientists express concern about scale of foam spill, the latest in a long, dirty history at former base](#)
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## All Comments

### 1. Comment by Maxwell\_Smart.

2 hrs ago

Everyone is over reacting

- **Reply by RetiredEngineer.**

13 min ago

Why don't you come and take swim in Harpswell Cove. While you are there dig up some clams and serve them for dinner. Over reaction my foot.

• •

- **Comment by CascoSnowbird.**

3 hrs ago

A routine sight at most of the air bases I was on in the 60's was watching the Crash Crew teams foaming down sections of runways during drills, and the occasional crash. This went on for decades. I can't imagine the amount of chemicals in the ground around these bases, most now deactivated.

- • **Comment by MElover.**

8 hrs ago

All in all, two pretty good articles on this incident. Credit to PPH reporters when due. Good Job !

- • **Comment by Sue.**

9 hrs ago

This is what we get when we let the petroleum industry gain way way too much power. I wish that would change, but something tells me the money talks.....quite loudly.

- **Reply by MElover.**

8 hrs ago

This incident has NOTHING to do with the petro-chem industry !! Try to stay On topic, tho I realize that is a struggle for some.

• •

- **Comment by PR.**

9 hrs ago

And the petrochemical industry marches on.

- • **Comment by Life in Maine.**

9 hrs ago

You can't safely and effectively put out a fuel fire using water. It just causes the fire to spread. This foam has been use for years and it's everywhere. Elsewhere in today's paper you can read that the South Portland Fire Department used the same foam to put out a diesel fuel fire at Long Creek. Within the industry, the dangers are well known and there has been much work to engineer a replacement that will meet Federal standards for extinguishing this type of fire. What's good for the Long Creek fire may not be good for a jet fuel fire at an airport. Things are changing but like everything of this magnitude it will take time. And a lot of money.

Still waiting for some thorough and objective reporting on PFAS foam. For those who are really interested and would like to learn more (or perhaps have a desire to educate the public), I would strongly suggest starting with this National Fire Protection Association article:

<https://www.nfpa.org/news-blogs-and-articles/nfpa-journal/2022/07/22/the-new-foam>

- **Reply by MElover.**

8 hrs ago

NICE comment and info!!

- • **Reply by RetiredEngineer.**

15 min ago

Great article. Thank you for sharing it. The solution is complex, but the problem has to be solved. Now.

• •

• **Comment by SteveSmall.**

10 hrs ago

Since this has been a superfund site since 1987, why hadn't the firefighting foam been removed from the site long ago?

• • **Comment by RetiredEngineer.**

11 hrs ago

We live on Harpswell Cove. MRRA's negligence has caused the closure of the cove to shell fishing, a prohibition on recreation and great anxiety throughout the neighborhood. At the meeting last night, while garbled on Zoom, we learned that MRRA sat on the AFFF problem in the hangars for at least a decade. Did they expect the problem to go away all by itself? The fact that the base is a Superfund cleanup site should have guided the MRRA in efforts to eliminate the hazards in the hangars. MRRA's negligence is as profound as it is shocking.

• • **Comment by A Real Person.**

14 hrs ago

The MRRA owns the hangar, and thus is responsible for the spill. According to their Website, the MRRA is "established as a body politic and public instrumentality of the State." The governor appoints the MRRA Board, and they are confirmed by the Legislature. The related legislative statute in Maine law is here <https://legislature.maine.gov/statutes/5/title5sec13083-G.html>.

Our taxes pay for this organization, and it's governed by political appointees. The only conclusion is that state and local government is responsible for the leak.

• **Reply by MElover.**

8 hrs ago

Good, factual info.; Thx RP !

• •

• **Comment by Snow\_in\_July.**



15 hrs ago

At some point the public needs to recognize the power of the chemical industry in rule making. They not only lobby Congress, make campaign contributions, but sadly utilize scientist that they pay to undermine regulations. The deck is stacked against human and environmental safety in the name of profits. This results in placing the blame on those directly responsible - our Senators and Representatives at both the federal and state levels.

• **Reply by scotBME.**

11 hrs ago

Right now? Better than 'drill, baby drill' Trump 'policy'

• • **Reply by Passcoverage.**

11 hrs ago

Sure did. Why so suspicious?