

Residents sound off to EPA at contamination forum

Forum addresses local issues of water contamination; local managers give updates on progress so far

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HORSHAM >> Residents and local lawmakers spent much of Wednesday afternoon sending a clear message to the federal Environmental Protection Agency — they want contaminated groundwater near two former airbases cleaned up as soon as possible.

“These neighbors are asking ‘How could this happen?’ And what medical challenges are in their future, and in the future of their children?” said state Rep. Tom Murt, R-152.

Murt was one of dozens of local residents and officials who spoke during an EPA community engagement meeting meant to gather feedback from area residents on the cleanup of two contaminants — perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) — found in public and private wells in the area of former air stations in Horsham and Warminster townships, and linked to firefighting chemicals used there.

“Today, we are here to listen, not only at a regional level but at a national level. This is a tremendous opportunity for us to learn from each other,” said EPA Regional Administrator Cosmo Servidio.

The EPA announced in May four priorities for tackling the groundwater contamination, in the Horsham and Warminster areas and at other similar sites across the country, according to Servidio and Peter Grevatt, EPA’s Director of the Office of Ground Water and Drinking Water.

The EPA is currently in the process of evaluating the proper maximum contaminant level of PFOA and PFOS, while starting the process of designating the two as hazardous substances under federal Superfund laws.

“That’s a very important step, for two reasons — unless a compound is designated as a hazardous substance, under Superfund, we’re not able to order cleanups, nor are we able to recover any costs we may incur when cleaning up contaminated sites,” Grevatt said.

The third EPA commitment was to develop groundwater cleanup recommendations for sites contaminated with PFOS and PFOA, which he said should be done by fall 2018, and the fourth priority is to work with other federal and state agencies to develop acceptable standards for other similar compounds that may also prove to have contaminated similar areas.

“There are many thousands of these compounds. We know a fair amount about a few of them. We need to know much more about the compounds that are in the environment, and we’re doing research to help fill those types of gaps,” Grevatt said.

“We also heard a clear call, from many of the participants today, about the need to balance our work on a small number of compounds, where we’ve taken action so far, and the need to understand the broader set of compounds in the environment,” he said.

Representatives from Horsham, Warrington and Warminster each described how those three townships have all committed to reducing levels of PFOS and PFOA well below the EPA's advisory level of 70 parts per trillion, down to a non-detectible level, and all three gave updates on how filtration systems have been added to contaminated wells and new connections made for residents with contaminated wells to use public systems, but with little movement on federal funding to fix those problems.

"We're looking to EPA and the federal government to set a standard for PFOS and PFOA which would require the Department of Defense to assist with funding, that would make all of the water non-detectible," said Warrington Township Manager Barry Luber.

"These three communities are all pretty much non-detectible, but the biggest issue with all three of us is reimbursement. All three communities, and rightly so, want it to non-detectible status, and so we want reimbursement of costs we've already incurred, but also future costs," said Horsham Township Manager Bill Walker.

A series of resident groups also took the floor to raise concerns of other areas that have also found contamination in recent months, including Upper Dublin, whose township Manager Paul Leonard said his 28,000 residents currently receive drinking water from three different utilities, one of which - Aqua Pennsylvania - has detected contamination levels below the 70 PPT level, but above the nondetectible level, in two of their wells.

"Aqua, through my assessment as township manager, is in need of your support for a rapid understanding of the conditions for groundwater contamination, and the impact on other wells, as well as surface water sources, for drinking water," he said.

Leonard said his township's commissioners voted earlier this month to indicate their unanimous support from a bill sponsored by Murt, the Pennsylvania Safe Drinking Water Act or House Bill 705, which would set a state standard of only five PPT for PFOS and PFOA each, well below the current EPA level of a combined 70 PPT. Township residents Mark Cuker, Lisa Faden and Jill Florin spoke out on behalf of a new Facebook group they have created, entitled "Upper Dublin Water Updates," meant to raise awareness of the contamination detected in that township and push for a lower standard there.

"Suffice it to say, we're not happy with the status quo," Cuker said.

Florin and Faden said they have heard from Aqua representatives that filtration systems on the two affected wells would cost roughly \$1 million each, but the company is working on a series of tiers to specify what level of contaminants they find acceptable, all of which are below the 70 PPT EPA level but above the nondetectible level.

"I've heard other townships, who really are doing everything in their power to get their water levels down to nondetectible levels. Unfortunately, our township has Aqua, and Aqua has done nothing," said Florin.

In a video message to the dozens of residents present, Congressman Brendan Boyle said he has pushed for lower PFOS and PFOA standards to be codified at the national level, while pushing the EPA and Department of Defense to no longer, in his words, "play whack-a-mole to address issues of contamination on a piecemeal basis, after the damage is already done."

"Our community has been faced with a great challenge, and I remain fully committed to making sure the federal government finally fulfills its responsibility to make this situation right," Boyle said.

"Whether in Washington or back home, I won't stop fighting to remedy this issue, today and into the future, in Horsham and across the country," he said.