

Senate subcommittee field hearing addresses effects of PFAS chemicals in Michigan

November 13, 2018

Senator Gary Peters (D-MI), ranking member of the Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management Subcommittee, convened a field hearing titled “Local, State and Federal Response to PFAS Contamination in Michigan” in his home state on November 13. The hearing focused on the emerging health and environmental impacts of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS).

PFAS are a group of manufactured chemicals used in a variety of industries around the world. They are found in a wide range of consumer products such as cookware, stain repellents, and firefighting foam. Although PFAS have been produced in consumer goods since the 1940s, certain PFAS chemicals are no longer manufactured in the United States as a result of phase-out programs. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), exposure to PFAS can lead to adverse human health effects. EPA established drinking water health advisories for PFAS in 2016, which have led to a recent increase in state regulation and litigation to limit their usage.

The subcommittee hearing sought to highlight how exposure to PFAS chemicals impacts Michigan communities and to inform potential federal actions to support local efforts to address PFAS contamination. Senator Peters called for a nationwide, federal regulatory standard for PFAS chemicals.

The hearing featured testimony from several expert witnesses, including health officials, environmental specialists, and Michigan citizens.

Carol Isaacs, director of the Michigan PFAS Action Response Team (MPART), outlined in her testimony several of the steps MPART has taken to address the PFAS crisis since November 2017 to address issues of PFAS contamination in Michigan. These steps included establishing new clean-up criteria for groundwater used for drinking water and taking nearly six thousand test samples at thirty-four identified PFAS sites.

Isaacs echoed Peters’ call for a federal regulatory standard for PFAS. “A national standard would allow uniform understanding of PFAS chemicals by all and would also assist in better understanding the use and disposal of the PFAS chemicals.”

The hearing also featured testimony from a Michigan resident named Sandy Wynn-Stelt, whose husband died from liver cancer in 2016. The full health effects of PFAS on humans are not well understood, but some studies have indicated that PFAS exposure, especially over long periods of time, may have a variety of health effects, including on the liver and kidneys. A year later, Wynn-Stelt’s water tested positive for PFAS contamination and her blood registered at 750 times the national average. “This is time [sic] when myself and my neighbors need our government representatives to stand up for us,” Wynn-Stelt said.

This field hearing follows two related committee hearings held in the House and Senate in September. Prior to those hearings, Senator Peters cosponsored two bills that seek to address the PFAS crisis (S. 3382 and S. 3381), which were introduced by Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) on August 23, 2018.

Senator Peters achieved a small victory in his fight to combat PFAS contamination after he successfully included a provision in legislation to reauthorize the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) that was signed into law last month. The provision introduced by Peters gives commercial airports the option to discontinue the use of firefighting foams that contain PFAS.

Sources: Environmental Protection Agency; U.S. Senate, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management; U.S. Senate, Senator Gary Peters.
