

Senate introduces bipartisan bill to designate PFAS as hazardous substances

March 1, 2019

On March 1, the Environment and Public Works Committee introduced the PFAS Action Act of 2019, a bipartisan bill that would require the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to classify per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) as hazardous substances within a year after the bill is passed. This declaration would expedite contaminated superfund remediation efforts by providing funds for cleanup efforts and charging polluters for remediation.

The bill, introduced by Senators Tom Carper (D-DE), Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV), Marco Rubio (R-FL), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Cory Gardner (R-CO), and others, shows the continuing bipartisan commitment of the Senate to address the emerging issue of PFAS contamination across the country. Carper, articulating the thoughts of his colleagues, said that “this is an issue that must be addressed with urgency—and that’s why this bill is so important.” This Senate bill serves as a companion to an identical bill introduced in the House (H.R.535) in January.

PFAS are synthetic chemicals that are largely unregulated at both state and federal levels, and are commonly found in products like firefighting foam, cleaning products, nonstick products, and paints. PFAS have been found to contribute to a series of health issues, including birth defects, cancer, and thyroid disorders. People are most commonly exposed to PFAS through air, soil, and drinking water.

Congressmen Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA-01) and Dan Kildee (D-MI-05) cofounded the Congressional PFAS Task Force in January with the purpose of creating a House action plan for PFAS cleanup. They recently issued a joint statement affirming that “PFAS chemical contamination is a public health crisis and the EPA must act with an urgency that matches the scale of the problem.”

EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler has said that EPA is working to deal with the issue, but legislators in both the House and Senate have insisted on a more concrete timeline.

Continuing the bipartisan effort to mitigate PFAS risks, the House Subcommittee on Environment held a hearing to examine PFAS chemicals and their associated threats to public health on March 6. The hearing sought to determine what efforts the Department of Defense is currently implementing to minimize the exposure of military communities to PFAS substances, as well as the plans EPA has for regulating these chemicals.

Sources: Environmental Protection Agency; Library of Congress; The Washington Post; U.S. Senate, Committee on Environment and Public Works.
