

Launceston Airport and fire fighting foam

Airservices role at Launceston Airport

Airservices Australia is a government-owned organisation that was established in 1995 to provide air navigation and aviation rescue fire fighting services (ARFFS). Airservices has provided these life-saving rescue and fire fighting services at Launceston Airport since 1995. Prior to that, they were provided by former Commonwealth agencies.

Use of fire fighting foam at Launceston Airport

Airservices does not use fire fighting foam containing per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) at Launceston Airport nor at any other civil airport in Australia.

Airservices began transitioning away from these foams in the early 2000s when concerns first started to emerge about the possible environmental impacts of these chemicals. Airservices has been using PFAS-free fire fighting foam since 2010.

From the early 1980s until the early 2000s, a fire fighting foam called 3M Lightwater was used by various industries around the world. This Aqueous Film Forming Foam (AFFF) was particularly effective for fighting liquid fuel fires and was widely adopted both in Australia and around the world. This product contained perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) as an active ingredient and other PFAS, such as perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA). In the early 2000s, following concerns that started to emerge about the possible environmental effects of PFAS, Airservices made the decision to change its fire fighting foam to a product called Ansulite which was thought to not contain PFOS. It was later found to contain trace amounts of these chemicals. Since 2010, Airservices has a PFAS-free foam, Solberg RF6 at all civilian airports where it operates, including at Launceston Airport.

What action has Airservices taken at Launceston Airport?

Transition of foam and testing

The first action was to stop using foams containing these chemicals which commenced in the early 2000s with a transition to Ansulite, and then a comprehensive roll-out of Solberg, a PFAS-free foam, completed in 2010.

Airservices then began testing and monitoring for these chemicals in 2008 with testing at the Fire Training Ground (FTG) confirming these chemicals in soil and groundwater at the FTG.

Investigations and characterisation

In 2016, Airservices commenced a Preliminary Site Investigation (PSI) for PFAS contamination across the entire airport to better understand potential impacts from the previous use of these legacy foams. This included limited sampling on airport. This is the process which Airservices is undertaking at all its sites as part of a National PFAS Management Program.

PSI results

The PSI found historic PFAS contamination on airport in close proximity to where firefighting activities were carried out at the airport. This was expected given the previous use of fire fighting foams containing PFAS at Airservices sites at the airport.

The PSI investigation detected PFAS on airport in soil, sediment and groundwater. On site investigations included the ARFF sites of the Main Fire Station (MFS), the Vehicle Maintenance Areas, and the Former Fire Training Ground (FFTG).

PFAS detections in soil or sediment were low and below human health assessment criteria. PFAS detections in groundwater on-airport exceeded criteria levels. However, the report notes that TasWater supplies reticulated public drinking water to the site and surrounding area.

The results of the report indicate further investigation is required and this will be undertaken as part of a Detailed Site Investigation (DSI).

Airservices has shared all the results with Launceston Airport and the environmental regulators - EPA Tasmania and the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Cities and Regional Development (DITCRD)).

Dedicated research and development

Airservices is focused on identifying practical remediation and containment solutions. Where applicable, successful research and development projects will be implemented at Launceston Airport.

Next steps

Airservices will now be undertaking further investigations in the form of a Detailed Site investigation (DSI). Airservices will continue to work with the relevant Commonwealth and State environmental regulators and health authorities and the airport, as part of a risk-based approach to responsibly manage PFAS at Launceston Airport.

More information

- Airservices will continue to keep the community informed and has published a copy of the latest report in relation to Launceston Airport on the Airservices Australia website: <https://www.airservicesaustralia.com/community/environment/pfas/>
- For media enquiries, please call 1300 619 341 or e-mail media@airservicesaustralia.com
- For PFAS enquiries please e-mail the Airservices project team: pfascomms@airservicesaustralia.com
- For PFAS health related enquiries, please consult the Commonwealth Department of Health website: <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-pfas.htm>
- For information about PFAS contamination and investigation in Tasmania contact EPA Tasmania: <http://epa.tas.gov.au/regulation/contaminated-sites/identification-and-assessment-of-contaminated-land/contaminated-land-issues/pfas-contamination>