

Melbourne Airport and fire fighting foam

Airservices' role at Melbourne Airport

Melbourne Airport is a Commonwealth airport, federally-regulated by the Commonwealth Government Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development and Cities (DIRDC). Airservices Australia is a Commonwealth Government-owned organisation established in 1995 to provide life-saving air navigation and aviation rescue fire fighting services (ARFFS) at airports, including Melbourne Airport. Pre-1995, other Commonwealth Government agencies delivered ARFFS at Melbourne Airport, going back to the 1950s.

Use of fire fighting foam at Melbourne Airport

Airservices does not use fire fighting foam containing per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) for fire fighting, or training, at Melbourne Airport, nor at any other civil airport in Australia. Airservices began transitioning away from these foams in the early 2000s, when concerns began to emerge about the possible environmental impacts of these chemicals.

Various industries around the world used a PFAS-containing foam called 3M Light Water, from the early 1980s to the early 2000s, for its effectiveness in fighting liquid fuel fires. This product contained active ingredient perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS), and other PFAS, such as perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA). In the early 2000s, as concerns emerged about the possible environmental effects of PFAS, Airservices changed to a fire fighting foam called Ansulite. Initially understood not to contain PFOS, trace amounts of Ansulite were later found. Since 2010, Airservices has only used a PFAS-free foam Solberg RF6 at all civil airports where it operates, including Melbourne Airport.

What action has Airservices taken at Melbourne Airport?

Airservices is taking a proactive and evidenced-based approach to managing PFAS contamination arising from the historical, or legacy-use, of fire fighting foam containing PFAS, at its leasehold sites.

▪ Foam transition and testing

Airservices has stopped using foams containing these chemicals. Airservices has been testing and monitoring for these chemicals, since 2008. Testing at Airservices-leased areas at Melbourne Airport, including the current Fire Training Ground (FTG) and Fire Station (FS), confirmed these chemicals in soil and groundwater.

▪ Investigation and characterisation

Airservices engaged independent consultants SEMF Pty Ltd, (now COVA), to undertake a Preliminary Site Investigation (PSI) and limited sampling program at Melbourne Airport, to better understand potential impacts from Airservices' prior use of these foams. Individual airport PSIs are part of Airservices' National PFAS Management Program. The Melbourne Airport PSI focused on areas historically used for Airservices ARFFS.

PSI results

The PSI found PFAS contamination on the airport at, and near, where fire fighting activities took place using legacy AFFFs. The PSI indicated there is currently insufficient information for Airservices to determine the likelihood of an unacceptable risk to receptors from the historical use of AFFF containing PFAS at Airservices sites on the airport and further investigation is required.

The PSI is available here: <https://www.airservicesaustralia.com/community/environment/pfas/>. The Environment Protection Authority Victoria (EPAV) advises normal drinking water supplies are not affected in this area.

Airservices has shared the PSI with Melbourne Airport operators, Australia Pacific Airports (Melbourne), (APAM); the onsite federal regulator, the Commonwealth Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development and Cities (DIRDC); the state regulator, EPAV, and the Victorian Department of Health.

Dedicated research and development

Airservices is focussed on identifying practical, effective technology to manage and contain PFAS, with various trials underway nationwide. Airservices plans to implement some of these technologies at Melbourne Airport in 2019, such as newly-developed solvents to immobilise PFAS in concrete. Airservices is also considering the potential for more conventional wastewater treatment, as the results of ongoing trials become available.

Next steps

Airservices is also working collaboratively with APAM, DIRDC and EPAV, as part of the Melbourne Airport PFAS Management Project Control Group (PCG), to coordinate an appropriate and effective response to PFAS contamination.

Airservices has commissioned further, targeted investigations on-airport to better characterise and manage PFAS on the airport, incorporating detailed analysis and sampling by other agencies, including airport operator APAM. These further investigations will include downstream water and sediment sampling of discharge points, from Airservices sites, to determine any potential off-property migration and to inform development of appropriate management strategies.

More information

- 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 on PFAS management at Melbourne Airport: <https://www.melbourneairport.com.au/Corporate/About-us/Environment/PFAS-Management>
- EPAV has a dedicated webpage for further information about PFAS, including advisories relating to waterways near Melbourne Airport: <https://www.epa.vic.gov.au/for-community/environmental-information/pfas>. You can also call 1300 372 842.