

NEWS RELEASE

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Questionnaire to Gather Health Information from Communities Impacted by PFOA



Current and former residents of Hoosick Falls and Petersburg, NY and Bennington, VT impacted by PFOA contamination are being urged to fill out a community health questionnaire.

Responding to community concerns, this questionnaire will gather local insight about the incidence of six illnesses that previous scientific studies have linked to PFOA exposure. This information will provide a preliminary outline of the health of residents in New York and Vermont impacted by PFOA. Residents have until October 1st to complete the questionnaire.

“PFOA in drinking water is known to damage health and no one knows how long the residents of Hoosick Falls, Petersburg and Bennington have been drinking contaminated water. This project is an effort to document possible health impacts from this legacy of pollution and encourage residents and regulators to be vigilant about health monitoring,” said Judith Enck, former Regional Administrator with the Environmental Protection Agency.

Perfluorooctanoic Acid, or PFOA, has come under growing scrutiny as an emerging human health risk that unfolds on the scale of parts per trillion and over the course of decades. As medical research advances new understandings of the subtle toxicity of PFOA, difficult questions about potential illnesses have arisen in communities impacted by PFOA contamination.

This health questionnaire uses the findings of premier epidemiological studies of PFOA – namely, the C8 Science Panel – as a prompt to elicit local knowledge of the health impact of PFOA. Conducted between 2005-2013 and enrolling 69,000 residents from West Virginia communities with PFOA tainted drinking water, the C-8 Science Panel concluded there is a “probable link” between exposure to PFOA and the following illnesses: diagnosed high cholesterol, ulcerative colitis, thyroid disease, testicular cancer, kidney cancer, and pregnancy-induced hypertension.

“PFOA has infiltrated our environment and our communities irrespective of the boundaries of responsible parties or state jurisdiction. By bringing together the impacted residents from New York and Vermont, this questionnaire focuses on the scale of the problem itself. By working with the deep knowledge community members have of their own health, this questionnaire will also help give local insight the prominence it deserves in broader discussions about PFOA,” said Dr. David Bond, the Associate Director of the Center for the Advancement of Public Action (CAPA) at Bennington College.

This questionnaire is supported by the project “Understanding PFOA” at Bennington College, and was designed by Dr. Zeke Bernstein and Dr. David Bond at Bennington College, environmental engineer Robert Chinery, physician Dr. Howard Freed, and Judith Enck.

The questionnaire will be distributed to communities over the month of September and the results will be reported back to the community soon thereafter. The health questionnaire can be filled out online (www.bennington.edu/PFOA and then click on “PFOA Community Health Questionnaire” link) or in paper form (available at local libraries). Members of the research team will also be in Hoosick Falls, Petersburg, and Bennington during September to distribute the questionnaire and help residents fill it out, as well as answer any questions.

PFOA is a synthetic chemical that is persistent, mobile, and toxic. Once a major ingredient in the manufacture of high-performance plastic like Teflon, PFOA was used extensively at industrial facilities in Hoosick Falls, Petersburg, and North Bennington.

Beginning in 2014, high levels of PFOA were detected in the public water system of Hoosick Falls and then in numerous private wells in and around Hoosick Falls, Petersburg, and Bennington. Water filtration systems have been installed and today New York and Vermont are moving forward with their respective remediation plans. Yet many residents still have questions about the potential long-term health impact of PFOA contamination.

A growing number of medical research and toxicology studies are providing new insight into PFOA, which is water-soluble, resists natural degradation, is chemically stable on the order of centuries, is readily absorbed into the body when consumed, has a half-life of 2–7 years in the human body, and accumulates in serum, kidneys, and the liver. Recent laboratory and epidemiological studies have strongly correlated exposure to PFOA with a number of adverse health effects, including developmental problems, immune disorders, reproductive harm, and kidney, bladder, and testicular cancer.

The New York State Department of Health (DOH) conducted an archival review of the NYS Cancer Registry and released a report in June 2016. This report found no significant incidence of cancer in the Village of Hoosick Falls, New York.

This questionnaire is the first effort to assess health concerns in these local communities that relies on the knowledge of community members themselves. This questionnaire seeks to gain a more comprehensive picture of health issues in these areas by polling current and former residents. This questionnaire also crosses state lines to bring together the three communities impacted by PFOA in this region.

“The residents of the communities impacted by PFOA are very concerned that the illnesses in the community have not been effectively documented. This questionnaire will try to reach all current and past residents and will encompass the full area that has been impacted. It will provide the community a more thorough picture of the health conditions shown to be related to PFOA,” said Robert Chinery.

There is ample justification for this questionnaire. As of yet, no comprehensive medical studies have engaged residents of New York and Vermont and there has not been a commitment to bio-monitoring of residents (similar to what occurred with first responders to the September 11th attack). By providing a snapshot of the community's health, this questionnaire will help suggest if further study is warranted and, if so, what direction that research might take.

New York State and the EPA recently designated the Hoosick Falls plant a Superfund site. Superfund requires that a comprehensive clean up take place and that polluters, not taxpayers, pay the full cost of the clean-up. The Superfund laws, however, do not fully address health problems associated with the contamination.

One challenge to conducting a project like this is getting former residents of the region to fill out the questionnaire. Community members are encouraged to widely share the questionnaire to former classmates or family members and friends who have moved away. The deadline for filling out the questionnaire is October 1, 2017.

If residents have questions about the questionnaire or to receive a copy, they should contact Dr. David Bond at (802) 440.4324 or email UnderstandingPFOA@bennington.edu.