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High levels of toxic chemicals found in Brunswick airport hangar sewers

Citizen PFAS monitoring revealed concerning levels of toxic chemicals in the sewer outfall of Hangar 6 in Brunswick.

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A citizens group's testing revealed that sewer water flowing from Hangar 6 at Brunswick's airport has high levels of harmful per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, better known as PFAS.

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay conducted testing on Nov. 26. The tests detected high levels of a particularly toxic PFAS chemical compound known as PFOS. The update comes the same day the owner of the hangar, the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority (MRRA), sent a letter to the town stating that tanks that stored the chemicals were not leaking.

PFOS is a compound known to be harmful to human health and is found in high levels in aqueous film-forming foam (AFFF). Brunswick airport's Hangar 4, which is owned by the Navy but operated by MRRA, dumped 1,450 gallons of AFFF concentrate mixed with 50,000 gallons of water on Aug. 19, 2024.

The spill prompted ongoing cleanup and monitoring efforts as well as a push to get rid of the foam at the airport. Concern has grown around Hangar 6, which some have speculated is leaking harmful chemicals based on the testing data around the airport that Friends of Merrymeeting Bay has collected over the years. The sewage that flows out of Hangar 6, which is not treated for PFAS, ultimately flows into the Androscoggin River.

Testing from November, which was conducted with the Brunswick Sewer Department using Cyclopure water test kits, showed that five sewer locations were sampled near the hangar and close to the airport. At the first location, known as the Navy Meter, Cyclopure tests detected 1,494.7 parts per trillion of PFOS. In total, it detected 2,029.2 parts per trillion of various PFAS compounds.

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Tests at another sample location, labeled as Hangar 6 West on the testing data sheet, detected 11,277.4 parts per trillion of PFOS and 56,508.9 parts per trillion of PFAS.

The remaining locations also showed PFOS levels ranging from 666.9 parts per trillion to 3,000. Total PFAS detected at all sample locations were well over 4,000 parts per trillion.

MRRA forwarded a letter to the town Tuesday morning, which Town Manager Julia Henze provided to The Times Record, that detailed a walkthrough of the hangars last week. The assessment was conducted by Poole Fire Protection — a third-party company secured by MRRA to assess risk and gauge solutions to the AFFF situation at the airport. The letter stated there was no sign of a leak based on observations at the hangars.

"Hangar 6 had one AFFF foam concentrate tank, and it was approximately 30% full. There has been no evidence of AFFF foam concentrate loss or usage, based on the markings on the concentrate tank since the last marking in August 2024 (approximately 5 months)," a representative for Poole Fire Protection wrote in the letter. "Therefore, if it my opinion, based on my field observations, there are no AFFF concentrate leaks in Hangar 6."

The letter also noted that the assessment discovered a small leak at Hangar 5 at the foam pump system piping, and a "minimum AFFF foam concentrate was being captured in spill absorbent." Poole described the leak as "minor" and located at the 1/4-inch connection for a pressure gauge that appeared from corrosion. It said that it was not near a floor drain and that the repair was scheduled for this week.

Henze also said at the town meeting on Monday that the water samples that Friends of Merrymeeting Bay took at the hangar will be available on the town's webpage.