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Statement from Delaware Riverkeeper Network on NJDEP study of Perfluorinated Compounds in Fish, Surface Water, and Sediment

Delaware Riverkeeper Network considers New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's (NJDEP) "Investigation of Levels of Perfluorinated Compounds in New Jersey Fish, Surface Water, and Sediment", released July 19 by the state's Division of Science, Research, and Environmental Health to be a landmark study documenting the prevalence and persistence of perfluorinated compounds (PFC) in New Jersey. (<https://www.nj.gov/dep/dsr/>) The findings verify that these highly toxic compounds are plaguing New Jersey's environment and require swift action by NJDEP to adopt safe drinking water standards for the compounds, particularly PFNA, PFOS, and PFOA, all of which have already been studied by the New Jersey Drinking Water Quality Institute, which has recommended maximum contaminant levels for all three compounds. It also shows that action is urgently needed to clean up the environment of PFCs.

The state completed extensive work to analyze the levels of 13 different per- and polyfluorinated substances (PFAS) in 11 waterways across New Jersey. Fourteen surface water and sediment samples and 94 fish tissue samples were collected in Passaic, Middlesex, Ocean, Burlington, Gloucester, and Salem Counties. The fish tissue investigation resulted in new fish consumption advisories, also released yesterday, which includes limits on consumption of fish because of the presence of dangerous levels of PFCs (<http://www.fishsmarteatsmartnj.org/>) Other pollutants were also sampled for and used to develop the new advisories, including mercury, PCBs, and pesticides. This is the first time that PFCs were included.

All surface water samples had detectable levels of PFCs with the highest levels in waters near the Joint Base McGuire–Dix–Lakehurst (JB MDL) military installations where Aqueous Film Forming Foams (AFFF) have been used in fire-fighting, a known source of PFC contamination. The highest total of PFAS in sediment is also at this location, with PFOS being the most found.

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PFCs were detected in all species of fish at all sites tested and the region around JB MDL had the highest levels. This resulted in fish consumption advisories based on PFCs for all 11 sites, varying from “one meal per week” to “do not eat”, depending on the concentration. The highest concentration of a PFAS was for PFOS. Other areas of New Jersey also showed high levels of PFOIS and other PFCs.

The highest level of PFNA was found in Woodbury Creek, near the Solvay plastics manufacturing plant in West Deptford. The high concentration of PFNA illustrates the persistence of this toxic compound in the environment, even after its use has been suspended. The sampling was conducted between 2015 and 2016 and Solvay reports that it has not used PFNA since 2010. The highest level of PFUnA was also found at this location. Because PFNA, PFUnA and other PFCs do not break down in the environment, they last indefinitely and pose substantial risk of adverse health effects for those who ingest them. Drinking water and fish consumption are major means of ingesting PFCs which build up in people’s blood, increasing the risk of developing certain diseases such as cancer, and other serious health effects. Many of the residents and workers in regions with high concentrations of PFCs have been exposed for decades.

“The NJ fish, surface water, and sediment study support the swift adoption of maximum contaminant levels (MCLs) for perfluorinated compounds by NJDEP. PFNA is ready to be adopted since the public rulemaking is complete; PFOA and PFOS have both been thoroughly studied by NJ’s Drinking Water Quality Institute which has recommended adoption of MCLs. But NJDEP has not acted yet on implementing the mandatory MCLs, inexplicably prolonging the exposure of people to drinking water contaminated with these PFCs. This study provides incontrovertible empirical evidence of the enormity of NJ’s PFC pollution problem that demands action by the state to remove these chemicals from NJ’s drinking water and to clean up the sources of these contaminants. The fish advisories issued are of groundbreaking importance because it gives essential information to people about the risks of eating fish caught in New Jersey’s waters. The information provided will help people make decisions about their consumption of fish and their family’s health but the advisories alone are not enough – New Jersey needs to take every measure possible to get these toxic chemicals out of our water, food, and environment by removing them from drinking water, identifying the polluters responsible for releasing them into the environment and cleaning up those sources, and educating people more fully, especially those who catch fish for subsistence or who eat fish regularly, especially at-risk populations,” said Tracy Carluccio, Deputy Director, Delaware Riverkeeper Network.

“New Jersey is doing the scientific research required to investigate the presence of perfluorinated compounds in the environment and is informing the public of what they find. It is extremely important that the information about the presence of these toxic compounds in various environmental media – such as fish and water – is shared widely so people will know what they are exposed to in their daily lives. In addition to the urgent need for safe drinking water standards, these fish advisories serve the important purpose of telling people they should limit their intake of fish caught in New Jersey waters based on the prevalence of PFCs and other dangerous pollutants such as mercury, PCBs, and pesticides. These are important advances that increase the public’s protection; once drinking water standards are adopted and other cleanup measures are taken, New Jersey will become a leader nationally on this front,” said Maya van Rossum, the Delaware Riverkeeper.

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