

Residents in Sydney's Western suburbs are the latest to find their health and their homes are at risk from a growing national environmental crisis, writes Lindsay Clout.

Imagine getting a knock on your front door on a Sunday afternoon that will change your life forever.

The person at your doorstep is from the Government.

They are here to tell you your property is now in a "Red Zone" of environmental contamination.

Globally banned chemicals from a nearby Defence base have seeped into the soil and water. They tell you not eat any food grown on your property. You must not drink water from your property. Also, best your kids do not even jump in a puddle in case water from it enters their mouth.

Your entire family should now also be tested to see if the chemical is in their bloodstream.

For thousands of people in New South Wales this is not some science fiction plot – it is reality. Since Defence finally got around to telling us in 2015 our lives have been thrown into turmoil.

We live in a Red Zone just out of Newcastle that has been polluted by firefighting chemicals leaking from the nearby Williamtown Airforce Base.

Last month more families in our community were door knocked and told that chemicals variously called PFAS or PFOS were spreading via waterways and the Red Zone would be expanding by over 50%. Just 12 months ago the same bureaucrats told our community there was no chance of that happening.

Now residents of Wattle Grove in Western Sydney are learning their soil and water could be contaminated by these chemicals which have leached out from the nearby Holsworthy Defence base.

The Defence platitudes and ‘don’t worry too much’ spin they’re getting in Wattle Grove sounds awfully familiar. Here’s three reasons why the residents of Williamtown recommend they don’t believe it.

- The chemicals and their impact on human health have been the subject of major legal settlements in the United States.
- The chemicals do not breakdown in the environment for decades or your bloodstream for up to nine years. We know from independent testing they are at levels in our community which far exceed any Government guideline globally.
- Defence knew for at least 20 years the risks of these chemicals and told no one. They knew at least two years that they were leaking into the Williamtown community before they told us.

Wattle Grove will join communities in Queensland, the Northern Territory and at least 17 other sites around Australia that are learning these chemicals are in their soil and water.

Like us, they may find cancer clusters among their community and banks flatly refusing to lend money on their Red Zone properties because of the risk.

They will also confront a wall of misinformation or simply none at all.

If a major corporation was the cause of this contamination would bureaucrats and our own Environmental Protection Agency be furiously downplaying the risks to a community?

Would Government Ministers stand on the sidelines and mumble the occasional public comment about “finding a solution”?

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To find out your health and that of your children is at serious risk simply because where you live is terrifying.

What is infuriating being to be played for fools by Defence, bureaucrats and politicians.

So, ask yourself, if you got that life-changing knock at the door one Sunday afternoon would you simply do nothing?

Because for the community of Williamtown the answer was, is and will remain no. We won't be ignored. We won't go away. And as the environmental disaster that has forever changed our lives grows, neither will dozens of other Australian communities.

Lindsay Clout is President of the Fullerton Cove Action Group.