

ENVIRONMENTAL OVERVIEW

As a transportation hub for the Inland Northwest and a leading driver of economic growth, Spokane International Airport takes pride in its leadership role across all elements of our operations, with the safety of passengers, employees, and the greater Spokane community of paramount importance. This includes a commitment to the environment.

Because of this focus, in 2017 we initiated a voluntary assessment to determine the possible presence of a group of chemicals known as PFAS (Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl substances) in the groundwater on Airport property. This began after it was discovered that nearby Fairchild Air Force Base had contributed to elevated levels of PFAS in the drinking water intake wells in the City of Airway Heights. The information from this effort was gathered in order to be used for future decision-making following the disclosure of the groundwater contamination caused by military activities near Airport property.

PFAS and the Federal Aviation Administration

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has long mandated that all U.S. commercial airports, including our Airport, use Aqueous Film Forming Foam (AFFF) due to the foam's effectiveness in airport firefighting efforts. In addition, Washington State law mandated the Airport to operate subject to federal laws, rules, and regulations.

While recent knowledge of PFAS impacts continue to develop, the presence and persistence of these man-made chemicals are also now known to be found in many everyday materials such as furniture, mattresses, non-stick cookware, dental floss, and more, including AFFF. Specifically, PFAS has been found in federally mandated firefighting foam used since the 1970s.

Historic Airport Property Use: Geiger Field/GEG

It is important to note that the Airport was originally owned by the federal government as a Department of Defense (DOD) Airport during WWII, then known as Geiger Field, from which the three-letter identifier and GEG was derived. During this period, several locations at the Airport were used as a military training site for firefighting operations, including the establishment and use of military burn pit sites.

Due to the type of training and contamination that occurred, and as a result of such operations, the DOD identified GEG as a Formerly Used Defense Site (FUDS) when the ownership was transferred to the local municipality. Under the FUDS Program, the DOD is responsible for cleaning up DOD-generated contamination on FUDS properties, which includes hazardous and toxic waste. From 1984 through 2003, the DOD tested, reported, and mitigated contamination of petroleum hydrocarbons above regulatory levels. During that era, PFAS was an unknown product, and as such was not identified as a hazardous or toxic material by the industry.

An Evolving National & Statewide Conversation

Today, the sources and impacts of PFAS are a challenging and complex issue and part of an evolving national conversation given their reach and scope. In fact, we are monitoring the lawsuit filed in May 2023 by the Washington Attorney General against 20 manufacturers of PFAS-related products, including AFFF ([AG Ferguson files lawsuit against 20 manufacturers of “forever chemicals” | Washington State](#)).

Although we have stated our concerns regarding the Department of Ecology’s initial approach to this matter, we are committed to working collaboratively with them, the FAA, other state and federal agencies and experts, and other stakeholders to more completely understand the complex issue of PFAS on the West Plains. Accordingly, we will continue investigating PFAS-related issues in a logical, data-driven manner.

Leading With Solutions

Earlier this year, the FAA announced a transition plan to a fluorine-free firefighting foam and recently authorized its use. As a leader in the industry, the Airport has taken immediate steps to authorize the purchase of the new fluorine-free AFFF.

We remain committed to our mission as an economic development driver for the Inland Northwest and are determined to work carefully through PFAS-related issues while continuing to operate, improve, and expand Spokane International Airport for the benefit of our regional economy.