

GAO Releases Report on Detecting, Limiting Exposure to, and Treating PFAS Contamination

Article By:

Lynn L. Bergeson

Carla N. Hutton

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) publicly released a report on September 27, 2023, entitled “**Persistent Chemicals: Detecting, Limiting Exposure To, and Treating PFAS Contamination**.” According to GAO, examples of how per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) enter the environment include:

- Manufacturing plants: Industrial processes can discharge PFAS-containing wastewater or emit PFAS into the air;
- Wastewater treatment plants: Effluent discharged from plants can contain PFAS;
- Agricultural lands: Biosolids used as fertilizer can contain PFAS and contaminate soil and water;
- Military or civilian airports: PFAS-containing firefighting foams can contaminate soil and water; and
- Landfills: PFAS-containing products (e.g., food packaging) disposed of without proper controls can contaminate soil and water.

GAO's recommendations, published in earlier reports, include:

- That the **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency** (EPA) conduct a nationwide analysis using comprehensive data to determine the demographic characteristics of communities with PFAS in their drinking water. According to GAO, "EPA agreed, but is still implementing the recommendation."
- That the **U.S. Food and Drug Administration** (FDA) request specific legal authority from Congress to compel companies to provide information they have about substances already on the market that come in contact with food. GAO states that "[a]s of May 2023, FDA officials said they were actively considering this recommendation."
- That the **Department of Defense** (DOD): (1) develop an approach to implement the prohibition on procuring certain PFAS-containing items; and (2) update its sustainable procurement guidance to implement PFAS-related policies and legislation. According to GAO, "DOD agreed but is still implementing the recommendations." GAO notes that additionally, it recommended that Congress consider aligning prohibitions with available information.

GAO states that it has ongoing work examining public water systems' implementation of PFAS treatment methods and efforts to destroy, dispose of, or store PFAS-contaminated waste safely.

According to GAO, in addition to its work on specific issues related to detecting PFAS occurrence in drinking water, limiting human exposure to PFAS, and treating PFAS contamination, it also **conducted a technology assessment** on broader challenges and opportunities for PFAS assessment, detection, and treatment. As part of that assessment, GAO states that it developed three policy options for

policymakers — Congress, federal agencies, state and local governments, academia, and industry — to:

- Promote research to address the limited information on health risks for the large number and diversity of PFAS;
- Expand the development of methods to allow researchers to identify and quantify better the thousands of PFAS known to exist; and
- Support the development and evaluation of full-scale technologies for disposing of and destroying PFAS.

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National Law Review, Volume XIII, Number 272

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