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Sunday, April 21, 2019

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BUCKS COUNTY COURIER TIMES

TAKING ITS TOLL

UNWELL WATER

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By Devlin Barrett and Matt Zapotosky
The Washington Post
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Environmental Protection Agency. That includes key public water wells in Warminster, Warrington and Horsham, along with one supply well on the Horsham Air Guard Station and about 250 private residential wells.

The Navy also has poured $3 million into environmental testing and studies, and has taken some interim measures to try and stop the former Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base Willow Grove and Naval Air Warfare Center Warminster. The Air National Guard has also spent millions dealing with contamination at the Horsham base.

But PFAS aren’t normal chemicals. Synthetically engineered to knock down fuel fires, they’re extremely difficult to get rid of. They stick around for decades, travel farther and wider than expected, and accumulate inside the bodies of those who consume them.

By any normal measure, the military’s response to the contamination has been substandard. The Navy says it has spent $48 million, $35 million of which was used to filter or provide alternative water for all drinking water sources that exceed a 70 parts per trillion (ppt) safety limit recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Five years after discovering PFAS contamination near military bases in southeast Pennsylvania and residents nearby confirmed that PFAS are leaving the former NAS-IBM Willow Grove and Horsham Air Guard Station and entering Park Creek. The waterway then empties into the Little Neshaminy Creek, which could be impacted by downstream water supplies such as Warrington’s Well 14 and private wells in Hartsville.

Steve Vernik’s home sits empty. It’s gone unsold for months, a parishion on the real estate market.

There’s little doubt in his mind it’s because of the toxic chemicals in his drinking water, bubbling up from a private well on the property, located at the southern tip of the contamination. After drinking water bottles for five years and waiting for someone to take responsibility for the contamination, he gave up moving his family seven months ago to a new home, finding it too pricey.

A second mortgage is the price they pay for peace of mind.

“This is one of the biggest financial hits I ever would have imagined I’d take in my life,” Vernik said. “Putting two mortgages and having to get a swing loan to get out of here, and all these other things, just brought me down to my knees in a sense. At the same time, I can’t risk my family’s health.”

Vernik personifies the real-world costs of a chemical contamination that continues to fester, five years after it was first discovered along the border of Bucks and Montgomery counties. The sources, or at least the largest known source, is a trio of current and former military bases in Warminster and Horsham, where firefighting chemicals called per- and polyfluoroal- kyl substances (PFAS) were used for decades.

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Steve Vernik stands in the Hartsville home his family left after learning their private drinking water well was contaminated with high levels of PFAS. The family now lives in Buckingham while they try to sell the Hartsville property. (BRYAN THOMAS / COURTESY)

By Kyle Bagenstose
and Jenny Wagner
kbagenstose@couriertimes.com
jwagner@couriertimes.com
@ATjwagner

See PFAS, A18
It’s a pilot study of a groundwater treatment system, and at the former Warner Robins base, it is testing out treatment groundwater system technology.

Regional officials meet the Navy’s claims with skepticism, saying they think the military’s local management efforts have been insufficient. EPA is hastening by national protocol to monitor the bases. The EPA has committed to providing test results to the public. EPA said it has no indication the Little Nexham base, which runs right through on to Horsham, is not the base’s local managers. municipal officials say they expect the Navy to cap wells and outfalls means the PFAS contamination is just barely being found in the bases. The water has to go somewhere, Crockett said. "If it’s not going to the creek, where is it going?"

Horsham Township Manager Bill Walker speaks during a meeting on water-quality issues held in the township in 2016. (CHLOE ELMER / FILE)
problem it faces. “I’m part of an organization that’s trying to resolve some problems related to the reason why I can’t be scored on any of the tests, which is because I’m bad,” Verick said.

It does not mean that just because a chemical is toxic to community levels, a little dose of it should not be considered. Environmental regulator, the Pennsylvania DEP, has supported the idea of establishing a nationwide drinking water standard. As state environmental regulator, the DEP, helps to draft legislation. The DEP said: “We are working our hardest to protect every possible avenue that we think can bring of relief to the victims of this crisis.”

Some others have sought ways around the perennial hurdles that come with creating regulation. They have succeeded in introducing legislation that would allow the ability to redirect tax revenues collected from the federal Superfund program to national testing initiatives. In Pennsylvania, lawmakers are considering other regulatory reforms that could allow a more expansive approach to controlling PFAS.

But Rementer said that the DEP does not want to get into the legal implications of PFAS contamination from military facilities in order to affect their costs of investigating and remediating hazardous substances. Instead, the DEP says it is required by state law to have a broader scope to appeal PFAS and fluoride standards. “By statute there’s just no doubt that the military to stop allowing the use of PFAS chemicals, and is struggling to find a way out of that mess,” Bergére said. But Bergére believes the DEP could already be acting to phase out PFAS chemicals off the bases in southeast Pennsylvania. Under the state’s Safe Drinking Water Act, the DEP’s 70 ppt drinking water advisory automatically becomes a groundwater standard, and the state’s Clean Streams law gives it the ability to order the military to stop allowing PFAS to leak from the bases into off-site waterways like Horsham’s Park Creek. Bergére says: “Every molecule, even at 1 ppt, of PFAS going to Park Creek could be a threat to Willow Creek, Wisconsin, and the Daily News-Miner of Fairbanks, Alaska.”

This news organization partnered with the Wisconsin State Journal of Madison, Wisconsin, and the Daily News-Miner of Fairbanks, Alaska, to create a reporting project called “Unwell Water.” The project was designed to expand collaboration online at gatehousenews.com/unwellwater/states/site/buckscountycourier-times.com.

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**PA lawmakers, regulators struggle to address chemical contamination**

By Kyle Bagenstose

A bathroom remains unused at the home Steven Vernik owns in Warwick. After finding that their private well contained high levels of PFAS, the Verniks moved to a new home in Buckingham. (WILLIAM THOMAS CAIN / COURTESY PA)

The filtration system Steven Vernik had installed in the home he owns in Horsham, center, joins U.S. Reps. Brendan Boyle and Mike Fitzpatrick at a press conference in January in the state Capitol. Boyle, R-152, created legislation to address PFAS chemicals. Stephens criticizes the EPA for not yet acting to create standards for the chemicals five years after they were first detected in drinking water. (MICHAEL B. KOREN / COURTESY PA)

The state’s primary environmental regulator, the DEP, helped to draft the legislation. The DEP said: “We are working our hardest to protect every possible avenue that we think can bring of relief to the victims of this crisis.”

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