

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5051
MINORITY (202) 225-5074

<http://oversight.house.gov>

Opening Statement

Chairman Harley Rouda

Hearing on “The Devil They Knew: PFAS Contamination and the Need for Corporate Accountability”

Subcommittee on Environment

July 24, 2019

Good afternoon. This is the second hearing the Subcommittee on Environment has convened this Congress to address the critical issue of perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, a class of man-made chemicals often referred to as PFAS. Let’s not beat around the bush here: These chemicals are toxic. They are known as “forever chemicals” because they do not easily break down. Instead, they accumulate in the environment and in the human body.

There is no way to avoid exposure to PFAS chemicals, because they are found in the regular household goods that we use every day, such as non-stick cookware, waterproof clothing and take-out containers. 99% of us here in the United States have these chemicals in our blood and, to give you an idea of the scope of the problem, PFAS chemicals have even been found in the bloodstreams of polar bears living in the Arctic Circle.

At our Subcommittee’s very first hearing of the 116th Congress, we examined the crisis of PFAS contamination of drinking water in and around military installations, largely due to the use of PFAS-containing firefighting foam in DOD training exercises. Veterans who have already risked their lives for our country are being asked to risk them again, each and every day, by drinking water filled with chemicals that have led to serious, adverse health outcomes in humans, including low fertility, birth defects, suppression of the immune system, thyroid disease, and cancer. At our hearing in March, the EPA’s Assistant Administrator for the Office of Water, David Ross, agreed that PFAS contamination was, quote, a “national emergency.”

We agree with Mr. Ross, and that’s why we are holding another hearing today, this time focusing on another major source of exposure to these chemicals: corporate pollution. Companies such as 3M and DuPont used PFAS to make household products that Americans used in their homes every day, like Teflon and Scotchgard, and these companies knew for decades that PFAS chemicals were toxic. In the 1970s, DuPont began regularly testing the concentration of PFAS in employees’ blood. In 1978, an

internal 3M memo reported that PFOA and PFOS, the two most notorious PFAS chemicals, and I quote, “should be regarded as toxic.”

You would think that in the United States, when we know a substance is toxic, we would take immediate action to prevent corporations from pumping those substances into our bodies and the environment. But it was only earlier *this year* that the EPA announced that it would consider regulating PFOA and PFOS. And in light of the EPA’s decision last week that it would not ban the use of the pesticide chlorpyrifos, which has been shown to damage brain development in children, forgive me if I’m not especially confident that the Trump Administration’s EPA will do the right thing regarding PFAS chemicals.

Let’s really think about the full extent of what’s been happening over the last half a century. 3M, DuPont and other industrial users knew that PFAS chemicals were bio-accumulative and toxic, and yet they continued to use products that contained PFAS. These corporations neglected to tell people what was in those products and, worse yet, suppressed the scientific evidence that these chemicals were hazardous. And they didn’t just use PFAS in industrial production—they discharged these chemicals into rivers and into landfills where they seeped into the groundwater. Americans have been drinking toxic chemicals from Teflon, Scotchgard and other products for decades, and we didn’t even know it.

This should not be happening. Americans expect that the products they use are safe. We are rightfully outraged when, say, a toy company recalls a product because it contains lead or other toxic chemicals—we feel betrayed, because we feel that it is a company’s responsibility to ensure that its products do not pose a danger to our children. And when companies violate that responsibility to the community, to society, we need to hold them accountable.

We in the federal government have stood by as industrial manufacturers polluted our households, our drinking water and our food supply. And we have mistakenly accepted it on faith that new shorter-carbon-chain “alternatives” to PFOA and PFOS, such as the chemical known as Gen X, were safe. But Gen X and similar compounds have not been shown to be safe; in fact, research indicates that they too are extremely toxic. One of our esteemed witnesses here today, Jamie DeWitt, a medical professor and researcher, will talk about her work on the toxicity of GenX chemicals.

Contrary to what some may say, I have no problem with 3M, DuPont, Chemours, Wolverine, Saint-Gobain and other companies turning a profit by making things Americans want to buy. I firmly believe in smart capitalism coupled with good government. What I do have a problem with is when these corporations place their own bottom lines ahead of Americans’ health. Because when you buy a product here in the United States, the fundamental assumption is that the product is safe. If you told someone, you can have non-stick cookware, you can have waterproof clothing, BUT it will come at the cost of your health, your children’s health, your liver, your kidney, your thyroid—maybe your life...I imagine there is not a single person who would make that trade. And corporations like 3M, DuPont and others knew that Americans would never make that trade. That’s why they suppressed the science that showed how toxic PFAS chemicals were—because they didn’t want Americans to know what they were being exposed to.

We have all heard the saying that “with great power comes great responsibility.” Well, these companies have indeed achieved great power in America—but now it’s time for the “responsibility” piece to kick in. These companies have evaded responsibility for far too long already, and we are finally going to start holding them accountable. Both Democratic and Republican state governments have already begun to do so, and representatives from Michigan, New Jersey and New Hampshire are here today to talk about the steps they are taking to keep their constituents safe. But state action, while immensely valuable, is not enough, and we need to take action at the federal level immediately.

And I want to assure everyone here today, and all the American people, that we in Congress are paying attention, and that we will not *stop* paying attention until we are sure that every single person in this country can drink water from their faucets and from their wells without worrying that it might someday kill them. We’ve already scheduled another hearing on this issue for September 10 at which 3M Company has already agreed to testify. We look forward to their appearance, and we urge DuPont to follow suit and also commit to testifying on September 10.

Thank you, and I now invite the Subcommittee’s Ranking Member, Mr. Comer, to give a five-minute opening statement.

Contact: Aryele Bradford, Communications Director, (202) 226-5181.