

Residents blast 'Russian roulette'

BY DONNA PAGE



UNDER FIRE: Defence deputy secretary Steve Grzeskowiak giving evidence at the parliamentary inquiry into PFAS chemicals. Picture: Jonathan Carroll



DISTRAUGHT: Williamstown resident Jenny Robinson urged the federal government to do the right thing and help affected families. Picture: Jonathan Carroll



FED UP: Williamstown property owner Des Maslen broke down as he told the hearing about the impact the contamination had on his family and business.

Picture: Jonathan Carroll

THE Department of Defence has admitted toxic firefighting chemicals are still leaking from Williamstown RAAF Base and that it is powerless to stop the pollution contaminating surrounding properties.

Defence's deputy secretary, Steve Grzeskowiak, told a federal government parliamentary inquiry into poly- and per-fluoroalkyl [PFAS] contamination on Tuesday, he did not know when the pollution would be contained.

More than 50 red zone residents and supporters booed and shouted from the public gallery as Mr Grzeskowiak gave evidence during a oneday hearing of the inquiry at the Mecure Newcastle Airport, Williamtown.

He said the pollution was "still running off the base" via drains during heavy rain and the three on-site water treatment plants could not stop the PFAS spread. "We understand there are significant levels of anxiety and concern in the community" he said.

Despite admitting that if Defence had its time again it would "have done some things differently", Mr Grzeskowiak refused to accept "liability" for the contamination.

His evidence followed more than a dozen residents who told harrowing stories of living in the red zone for more than three years.

Parents with PFAS-infected children, families struggling to pay their mortgages and people "trapped" in the contamination zone because no one will buy their properties.

Residents accused the federal government of playing "Russian roulette" with their lives in a stinging rebuke to what one described as the "pathetically inadequate" handling of toxic PFAS chemicals spilling off the base.

After three years of struggling to be heard, residents told the parliamentary committee chaired by Liberal MP Andrew Laming, how they "live in hell every day" and are "frightened" to remain on their contaminated properties, but can't escape.

Visibly shaken Williamstown resident Jenny Robinson said her family's "whole world had been turned upside down" after she learnt of the PFAS contamination via the media in September 2015. "Our faith in the right thing would be done has taken a huge beating," Mrs Robinson said. "We live this hell every day"

The Cabbage Tree Road resident said she suffered from breast cancer and questioned the link to the toxic firefighting chemicals. Supported by her husband, Terry, Mrs Robinson explained how it had been left for the community to look after itself and residents' stress levels were overwhelming.

"All we've been given is restrictions on how we should live" she said. "We can't remove a barrow of soil ... but the expansion of the RAAF base goes on like nothing has happened."

Fullerton Cove resident Sue Walker told the inquiry the federal government had a "moral obligation" to put residents' "safety first", but continually refused to do so. She described the situation residents found themselves in, through no fault of their own, as "immoral" and "inhumane".

"It's now like a game of Russian roulette for us," she said. "It's disgusting."

Inquiry committee members, Newcastle MP Sharon Claydon and deputy chair Northern Territory senator Malarndirri McCarthy, acknowledged the rebuke, telling residents their message was being heard "loud and clear".

Several witnesses told the inquiry that there was "no one driving the bus" to manage the contamination, despite the community campaigning for a project management plan for three years.

The Coalition Against PFAS president Lindsay Clout said the community wanted the contamination cleaned up and compensation packages to meet the needs of residents and businesses.

Mr Clout said the findings of the federal government's expert health panel – that there is no evidence that PFAS causes "important" health effects – "angers me".

"The pollution is still leaving the base, the community is still trapped prisoners to this contamination...", he said. "Defence is standing there with their finger in the dyke and it's still leaking."

Residents told the parliamentary committee members they had the ability to be a catalyst for change, to help them escape the "nightmare" that had become their daily lives.

Former Williamstown RAAF Base commander John Donahoo called for Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Defence Minister Marise Payne to "take ownership" of the environmental disaster.

Mr Donahoo urged the pair to visit Williamstown and "announce a voluntary acquisition scheme, or, look the local PFAS-affected residents in the eye, and tell them that they know that the actions of the Australian government have caused their current torment, but they just do not care about them, and they will continue to adopt a do nothing option".

"One of the many roles of government is to act decently towards its citizens and to provide them with hope" he said. "Regrettably, the current government has denied the PFAS-affected citizens any hope for the future. These are not the actions of a decent government."

Mrs Walker said she found it unbelievable that the Turnbull government continued to ignore the US EPA's finding that "the weight of evidence" supports the conclusion that the chemicals are a human health hazard.

"We exist in a catatonic state - in limbo - we just want a normal life," she said. "As far as I know they haven't even stopped it coming off the base ... we want to get out of this place"

The emotion was too much for some residents who broke down while telling the inquiry of the impact of the pollution on their lives. At other times there was a collective cheering from the public gallery.

Williamstown and Surrounds Resident Action Group president Cain Gorfine said Defence knew the fire-fighting chemicals were harmful to the environment, but acted with "negligence" for decades.

Mr Gorfine said the "harsh reality" was Defence had "permanently altered the path" chosen for his family and "torn at the seams of the fabric of our dreams . He said residents had "met the behemoth that is Defence" head on and "it has rolled straight over us".

"Your challenges are clear, and the community's expectation is even clearer: demand that Defence stop immediately any further contamination leaving the drains which exit the base" he said. "Demand compensation, just like your colleagues did back in 2015, for the families of Williamstown, Salt Ash and Fullerton Cove, ensure those payments reach our bank accounts before our fourth Christmas living this nightmare"

Mr Gorfine's wife, Rhianna, said the community would not back down. "Time's up" she said. "Enough is enough. They need to come to Williamstown, sort this out and give the community back it's future."

Samantha Kelly, who fled the red zone in 2016 after her baby son William was found to have significant levels of toxic chemicals in his blood, said the community had suffered enough.

"Our government knows our children are being poisoned and exposed to chemicals and they are doing nothing about it," she said.