

Queensland Government

PFAS Incident Management and Stakeholder Engagement Guidelines

A guide to responding to PFAS incidents

Prepared by: Queensland Government

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Introduction

The Queensland Government expects and supports timely communications and community engagement, where elevated PFAS (per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances) levels are detected.

This document provides guidance for State agencies about the Queensland Government's incident response framework and expectations on how community engagement should be conducted. This guidance is based on the Queensland Government's approach to categorising PFAS exposure risks.

In general, the Queensland Government expects that communication will be timely, simple and appropriately advise the community about health and environmental risks.

Audience

The Queensland Government prioritises stakeholders being given timely, prompt and accurate information about potential PFAS contamination.

In general, the entity responsible for the pollution ('the responsible entity') should lead community engagement¹. Examples include the entity that was responsible for a PFAS spill, or who has control of and is responsible for a site that is the source of PFAS contamination.

This document should be used by Queensland Government agencies to:

- support a responsible entity's community engagement efforts; and
- take action (as required) to ensure that potentially affected stakeholders are informed of PFAS detection and investigations.

Using this document:

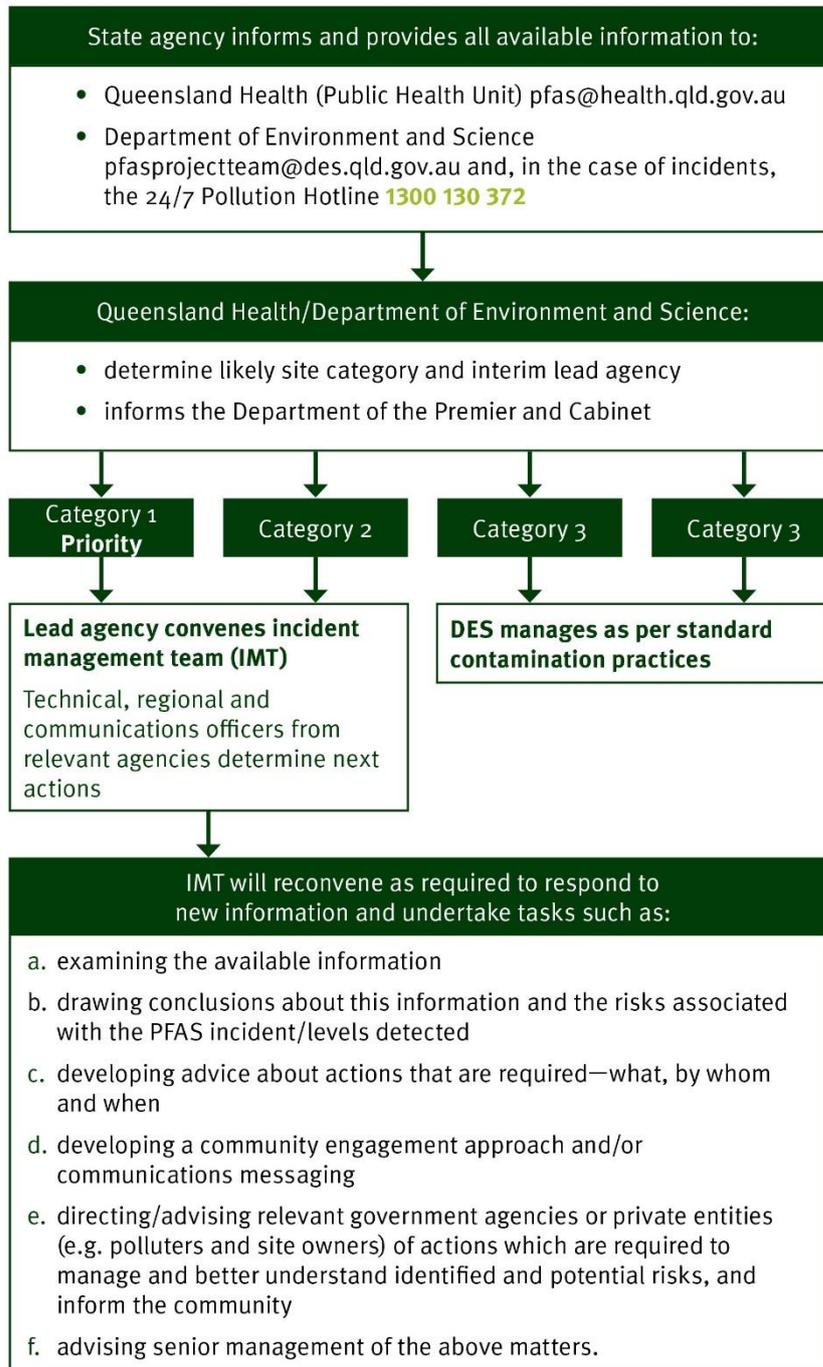
This document includes:

- a rationale for a PFAS-specific communication approach
- a framework for categorising the risks associated with a PFAS detection—via a comparison against health criteria and an assessment of the potential for exposure
- an overview of the Queensland Government's processes for evaluating reported PFAS detections against these criteria—to determine its categorisation—and identifying relevant stakeholders
- Government's engagement and communication expectations of responsible entities—based on the assessed risk category of the PFAS detection; and
- which agencies will lead the Queensland Government's communications responses and a general framework for determining the timing of initial stakeholder notification.

¹ More broadly, the responsible entity should provide timely information to potentially affected stakeholders on matters relating to the PFAS detections.

Queensland’s process for responding to PFAS incidents and detections

The following applies when a State agency receives data indicating elevated PFAS levels or becomes aware of a PFAS spill or possible site contamination:



The IMT will meet until there is confidence that all health risks are being adequately addressed, investigated or managed.

The PFAS Technical Working Group will be consulted as required.

1 PFAS-specific communication approach

PFAS are one of many contaminants in our environment. Recent PFAS contamination incidents, particularly in the Brisbane River and at the Army Aviation Centre Oakey, have generated significant community concern.

For these reasons, notifications to the community about PFAS contamination are prioritised.

To ensure the community understands PFAS, all incident-specific communication will be accompanied by general information about PFAS, its widespread historical use (and likely discovery) and the relative risk it poses to human health and the environment.

While it is acknowledged that PFAS is of current concern to the community, available research suggests risks to human health are minimal.

Queensland has a well-established process for advising the community of environmental contamination. Land owners and occupiers are required by law to report contamination of land, and uses of land which may lead to contamination, to the Department of Environment and Science. This information is recorded on the Environmental Management Register and Contaminated Land Register, which anyone may search.

The Queensland Government's communication approach into the future is to gradually bring PFAS community notification procedures back into line with all other environmental contaminants. This means that stakeholders will be notified if they are directly affected (equivalent to Category 1 Priority and Category 1 incidents; described further below), but otherwise on-site contamination will be placed on the relevant land register.

The category communication approach plays a key part in this community education. Over the longer term, as community knowledge increases, the need for PFAS notifications to be prioritised will taper off, taking into account the number and severity of PFAS contamination incidents and the communication that accompanies those incidents. Over time, it is anticipated that communications will return to a level consistent with communication practices around other contaminants. This means that whenever there is the potential for human exposure above criteria guidelines, the community will be proactively informed. However, when there is no potential for human exposure sites will be placed on the relevant public environmental or contaminated land register, as appropriate.

2 Categorising the risks associated with PFAS detections²

The Queensland Government uses four risk categories to inform decisions about community engagement.

These categories are based on an understanding of the levels of PFAS detected, and the potential that people or the environment will be exposed to PFAS, consistent with the potential for human or environmental exposure above nationally-recognised criteria.

The categories are:

Category 1 Priority – Detections exceed health criteria and there is a potential for human exposure through drinking water

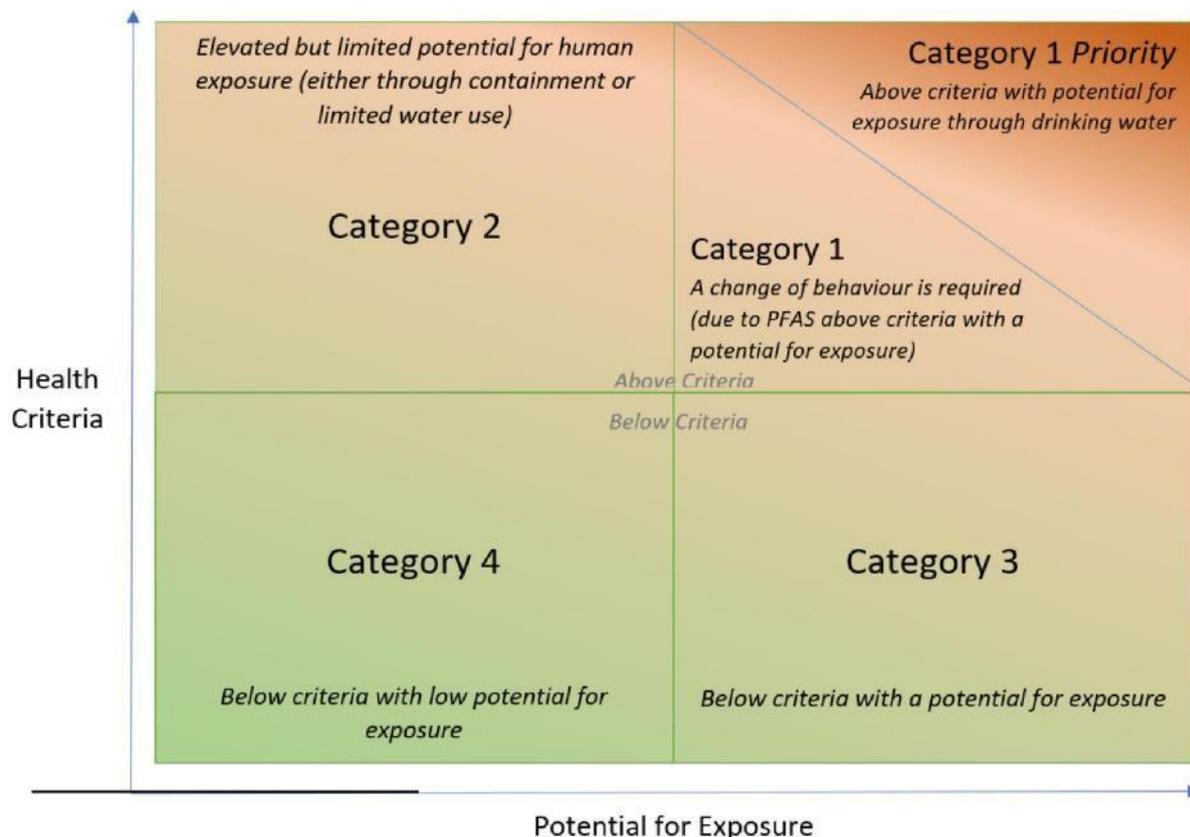
Category 1 – When a change of behaviour is required to reduce exposure based on real or potential health risks (detections exceed health criteria and there is a reasonable potential for human exposure)

Category 2 – Detections are elevated but contamination is likely contained on site and there is not a reasonable potential for human exposure (no need to change behaviour).

Category 3 – Detections do not exceed health criteria but there is a low potential for human exposure (no material risk)

Category 4 – Detections do not exceed health criteria and there is no reasonable potential for human exposure (no demonstrated risk)

These categories and their relationship between recognised health criteria and the potential for exposure is represented below.



²This document is for guidance purposes only.

3 The Queensland Government's processes for evaluating reported PFAS detections

Rapid consideration of reported PFAS levels is essential so that risk can be considered and timely advice provided³.

This advice will help inform primary stakeholders (those with affected receptor pathways) so that they can take actions to reduce PFAS exposure/risks, and so that the responsible entity can take actions to minimise exposure pathways.

4 The Queensland Government's expectations of responsible entities for community engagement and wider communications

The table in the Appendix applies to the previously outlined risk categories and should be used to determine the Queensland Government's engagement expectations of the responsible entity and general approach to community engagement of both the responsible entity and the Queensland Government.

This is based on the responsible entity being:

- a Federal Government entity (e.g. Defence entity or airport)
- a Queensland Government entity (e.g. Queensland Government department, an Emergency Services agency or a Government Owned Corporation)
- a Local Government entity (e.g. Council), or
- a private entity.

The capacity of the responsible entity to manage a PFAS contamination response is also considered in the table in section 5, noting the Queensland Government may take action where a responsible entity is unwilling or unable to take appropriate action.

5 Identifying stakeholders, government 'lead-agency' and preferred timing (initial notification)

Determining/identifying stakeholders

In developing a site-specific strategy, identifying affected stakeholders will help to target activities, tailor messages and materials. There are three types of stakeholders:

- **Primary** – those who are *directly* affected (residences with receptor pathways, workers)
- **Secondary** – those with a *vested* interest (e.g., general practitioners) or *general* interest (wider community)
- **Influencers** – media.

The communication method must balance the number of potentially affected residents (primary stakeholders) with the potential for unintended or unnecessary consequences.

Primary stakeholders *must* be informed when an investigation is taking place on their property, or when they may be exposed to PFAS above nationally-recognised criteria.

When contamination is limited to a small number of residences, it is usually preferable to engage directly with affected primary stakeholders, with the exception being where the problem is so dispersed that **influencers may assist informing the wider community**.

³Refer to section 5 of this document which deals with identifying stakeholders, government 'lead-agency' and preferred timing (initial notification).

Contamination and transparency

When contamination is identified, the site will be placed on the searchable Environmental Management Register (EMR) or the Contaminated Land Register as per requirements in the *Environmental Protection Act 1994* s.371 and s.372.

Determining the lead Queensland Government agency

While it is expected that the polluter will lead the community engagement and communications response across all categories, each incident will also have a Queensland Government agency recognised as the lead Government agency to monitor the investigation or community engagement. The lead agency acts as a central point for the polluter in seeking input into and approval of communication materials.

The category should be determined based on the available evidence at any given time.

Category	Responsibility
Category 1 priority	Incidents will be led by Queensland Health, and will transition to the Department of Environment and Science (DES) when immediate health risks are resolved.
Category 1	<p>Investigation</p> <p>As a general rule DES will lead Queensland Government investigations to identify sources of pollution and hold responsible entities accountable for environmental investigations and remediation as required, in collaboration with Queensland Health.</p> <p>Proactive communication (when the Queensland Government is conducting a media release)</p> <p>Queensland Health* will lead Queensland Government proactive communications if it is advising people to change their behaviour based on potential or known health risks.</p> <p><i>*In circumstances where there is a benefit in doing so, a Queensland Government release will be issued referencing both DES and Queensland Health advice.</i></p> <p><i>*If there is a known polluter, DES will engage directly with the polluter for the polluter to conduct communications.</i></p>
Category 2, 3 and 4	Incidents will be led by DES.

Following the initial proactive community notification (applicable in Category 1 Priority, 1 and 2), information should continue to be released to the community in a coordinated fashion where possible. However, this would not preclude non-lead agencies releasing information or responding to media enquiries relevant to their portfolio, while keeping lead agencies informed of such communications.

Timing and content considerations for community engagement and communication response

In May 2018, an independent expert panel—commissioned by the Federal Government—released a report which found there was no consistent evidence that exposure to PFAS causes adverse human health effects. Moreover, PFAS contamination is not an acute issue, but potentially a chronic one which takes a long time to manifest. For these reasons, the Queensland Government seeks to balance the communication response across several factors, including:

- the actual level of risk to primary stakeholders (if any)
- the ability to provide reliable health and environmental advice with limited information
- local residents’ rights to privacy
- unintended or unnecessary community impacts
- what actions can be taken to immediately reduce the health risk to the local population
- the certainty with which the responsible entity can be quickly identified
- the wider unaffected community’s interest in the investigation.

Timing of initial <i>primary stakeholder</i> notification of a PFAS contamination				
Category 1 Priority	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Category 4
Within 24 hours of reliable test results indicating that drinking water has been affected above criteria.	Within 48 hours of receipt of reliable test results indicating a Category 1, non-drinking water contamination.	Primary stakeholders within 3 business days of receipt of reliable test results. Otherwise as per investigation needs.	Local engagement when off-site testing commences.	Not generally applicable. Engage as per investigation needs.

As a general rule, the communication response should keep pace with the investigation into the contamination. For example, if testing is occurring in a residential area, material about the contamination and testing program, along with health advice, should be available to those residents concurrently.