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Feds say they will prioritize other PFAS cleanup projects over sites in Santa Fe County

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Kathleen McCloud chats with Stan Jones as he cleans out his coffee mug Tuesday. The couple still drinks water from the tap, McCloud has installed multiple filtration systems in the La Cieneguilla home where she has lived since 1988 after her well test was positive for low levels of PFAS, also known as “forever chemicals,” which are believed to have come from firefighting foam at nearby National Guard site.

Jim Weber/The New Mexican

This year, Kathleen McCloud hesitated to eat the apples off the trees at her home in La Cieneguilla. Apricot season, too, held less of the usual excitement and more anxiety.

Privacy - Terms

McCloud moved to the community south of Santa Fe from the North Valley of Albuquerque in 1988, attracted by the history and the rural lifestyle.

“I marvel at it all the time,” McCloud said. “How it’s become home.”

Her relationship to that home has changed, however, since McCloud’s well tested positive for low levels of five types of perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, also known as “forever chemicals” for their long lifespan. The chemicals are found in consumer products like nonstick cookware, but they were also used in high concentrations in firefighting foam at the New Mexico National Guard site at Santa Fe Municipal Airport, near McCloud’s home.

“It’s so insidious now that it’s no longer just water,” McCloud said. “Of course, PFAS are everywhere, all over the world. I’m not taking it entirely personally.”

Farther south, wells near a New Mexico military installation are one of almost five dozen sites around the country being prioritized for the cleanup of hazardous forever chemicals.

Nationwide, the U.S. Department of Defense has investigated possible PFAS releases at 700 different locations. At 55 of those, high levels of PFAS contamination were found at nearby private drinking water wells. A September memo released by the department said it would focus on managing PFAS contamination in private drinking water wells that are three times above the Environmental Protection Agency’s limits.

The agency recently imposed stricter limits on the amount of PFAS that is considered safe in drinking water.

Pentagon spokesman Bob Ditchey wrote in an email the approach allows the Defense Department to start cleaning up the worst of the worst while still investigating other areas.

“These 55 locations are where our highest levels of PFAS in drinking water have been found and why those locations are included in the first phase of our prioritized approach,” Ditchey wrote. “However, that doesn’t exclude other locations where — during the process of our investigations — we might find additional private water wells that are at or above 3 times the MCLs [maximum contaminant levels] resulting from DoD releases.”

Currently, that includes one location in New Mexico, Ditchey wrote — Cannon Air Force Base, near Clovis. Outside the installation, the use of firefighting foam and other sources of contamination have impacted the Ogallala Aquifer. The base, Ditchey wrote, “was found to have off-base impacts of PFAS to private drinking water wells at the highest levels.”

The state Environment Department offered free blood tests to people who live and work near Cannon in September and October this year.

In addition to Department of Defense investigations, some federal infrastructure money can go toward PFAS testing.

Earlier this year, the Environment Department announced it would receive around \$19 million in grant money to go towards PFAS detection in public water systems in smaller communities that might not be able to afford testing.

But that money isn’t meant to test private wells.

PFAS, which have been linked to several diseases, have been detected in other areas. The Environment Department and other state agencies sued the federal government in July over what the complaint called the “improper disposal of and the unlawful failure to contain or address contaminants, hazardous wastes, and hazardous substances” around Holloman and Kirtland air force bases, the White Sands Missile Range and Fort Wingate, as well as Cannon.

Closer to home, PFAS were detected in half of wells tested in communities south of Santa Fe in May, likely stemming from the site near Santa Fe Regional Airport that had been used by the New Mexico National Guard. PFAS were identified there in 2023.

A few years ago, McCloud heard talk about a potential leak of flame retardant. It had been in the back of her mind since, but she didn’t think she would be affected.

Now, she’s had to take on surprise bills — \$500 to test her well and about \$1,000 to set up a filtration and reverse osmosis system for her house.

La Cienega Valley Association President Andrea La Cruz-Crawford said when the association realized the length of time it might take before mitigation or cleanup efforts begin, members told residents to test their water and install filtration systems if the test was positive.

“A lot of residents did that with their own money and saved receipts in the hopes of getting reimbursed,” La Cruz-Crawford said.

Santa Fe County offers grants of up to \$50,000 for some home rehabilitation and energy-efficiency projects for people living in unincorporated parts of the county. It can be used for water testing and filtration installations — but La Cruz-Crawford said the program is geared toward low-income residents, so people making more than the income threshold are still stuck with the bill.

At a Tuesday meeting of the Legislature’s Radioactive and Hazardous Materials Committee, Elena Fernandez, a projects specialist with water conservation group Amigos Bravos, said the organization received funding to put toward untested wells in La Cieneguilla, which she said has experienced high rates of disease for a small community.

Those funds — which Fernandez said can only cover 20 wells — will help identify where a plume might be in the community.

The group is also trying to coordinate a cancer study for the entire census tract of La Cienega Valley with the University of New Mexico Tumor Registry and the state Department of Health.

“*Agua es vida*,” scoffed La Cieneguilla Land Grant resident Jose Villegas in a September interview. “That mindset is out the door.”

“Water is life” was the way in his youth, Villegas said. But now, he sees conflict and clashes over the limited resource, which he feels has been commodified.

Villegas has been buying water from Target and Walmart after his well tested positive for PFAS. He worries contamination could spread south to the Cochiti and San Felipe pueblos. His doctor recently returned the results of a blood test — “I’m jacked,” Villegas said.

At the time of the interview, his wife had a blood test scheduled.

“I don’t care about me,” Villegas said. “I care about her. ... She’s getting one next week and I am scared to death for her.”

He wants to see more action, including a state of emergency called, which he thinks will make more aid available to the community. To restore the “water is life” mindset, Villegas wants a private, domestic water system to be created for the community.

In August, Santa Fe County commissioners inked a deal with a company that would help consult on sampling and analysis on residential wells. Earlier this year, the city and county joined forces with an agreement

Though the city of Santa Fe and Santa Fe County have a reputation for butting heads, the two entities made a step toward collaboration with the approval last week of an agreement for PFAS monitoring. The agreement requires the city and county to share data and cooperate on efforts to characterize the PFAS plume and maintain existing monitoring wells or identify sites for new wells.

The agreement includes a requirement for the county to share any data it obtains, Dupuis said, which the city will make available as it receives it. The county also has a public page on its website with PFAS information.

Ida Campos has been living in La Cieneguilla for 30 years. She was feeling crowded in downtown Santa Fe and was drawn to the open space.

Her well tested positive for low levels of PFAS. She set up an under-the-sink filtration system, but given how long she's lived in the area, she feels like taking a blood test would be "overkill."

Campos said she feels like local government is stepping up, despite the potentially long wait for cleanup efforts. Mitigation can be done right, once, Campos said, or be done quickly and potentially require more work.

She holds manufacturers more responsible.

Santa Fe city councilors voted unanimously last week to opt out of a class-action lawsuit for public water systems against chemical company BASF. City Attorney Erin McSherry said the payout of the lawsuit was likely to be small, around \$2,000 or less, and the settlement would prevent the city from bringing future lawsuits against the company.

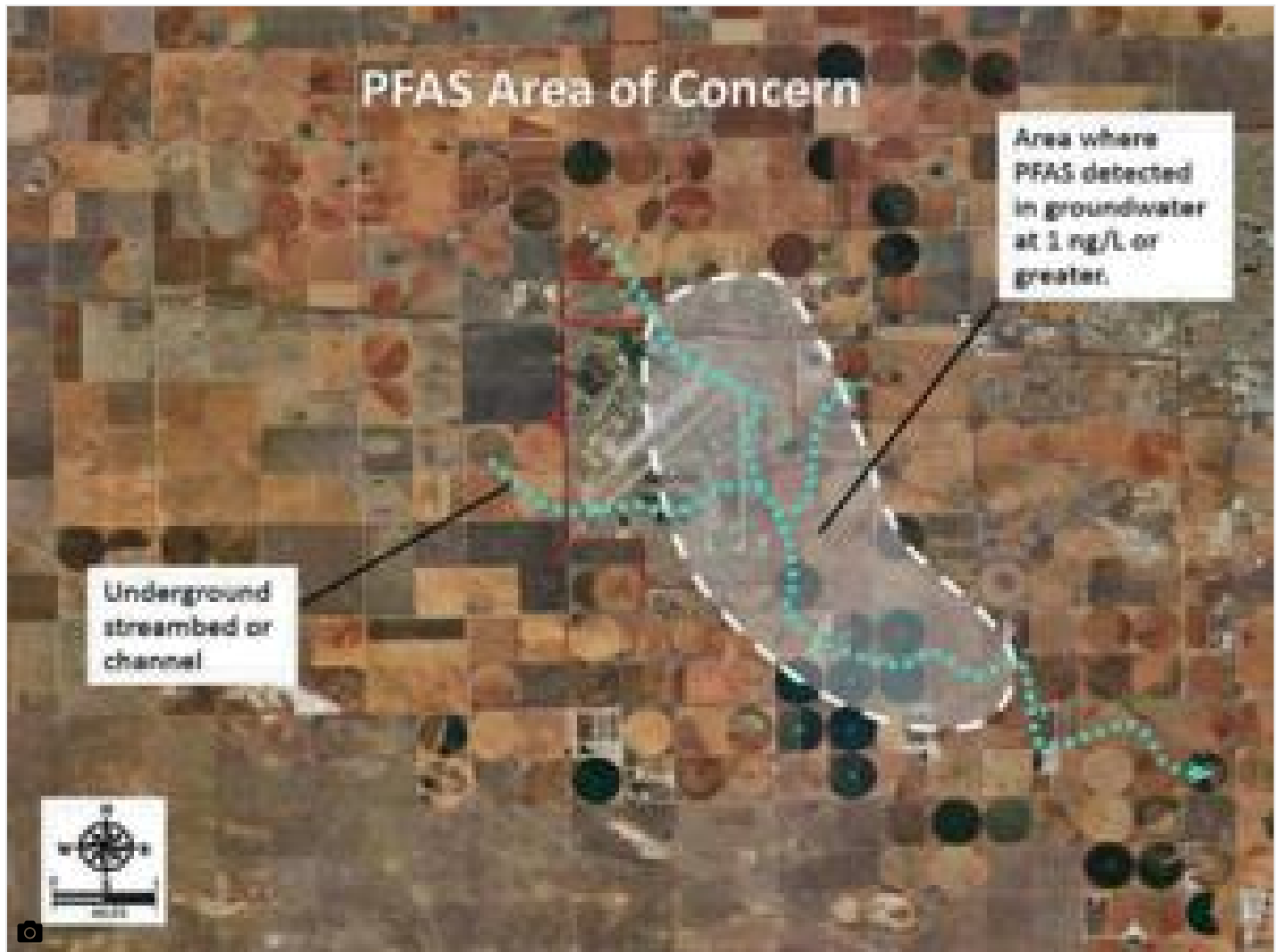
"It's just not within one person's control," Campos said. "It's nationwide, and we have it easy compared to others. I guess I'm saying count our blessings — it could be much, much worse."



Santa Fe County to investigate toxic chemicals in wells



City, county enter into PFAS monitoring agreement



State to receive \$19M to detect cancer-causing chemicals in water



Santa Fe County residents join national PFAS-related class action lawsuit



EPA sets tougher limits on cancer-causing chemicals in drinking water

Takeaways

Takeaways

Private wells impacted by Cannon Air Force Base are one of 55 priority locations the federal government identified for PFAS cleanup.

Often called “forever chemicals” for their long lifespan, PFAS have been linked to several health conditions.

Some New Mexicans living in PFAS-contaminated areas are trying to manage contamination on their own by testing their wells and installing filtration systems.

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