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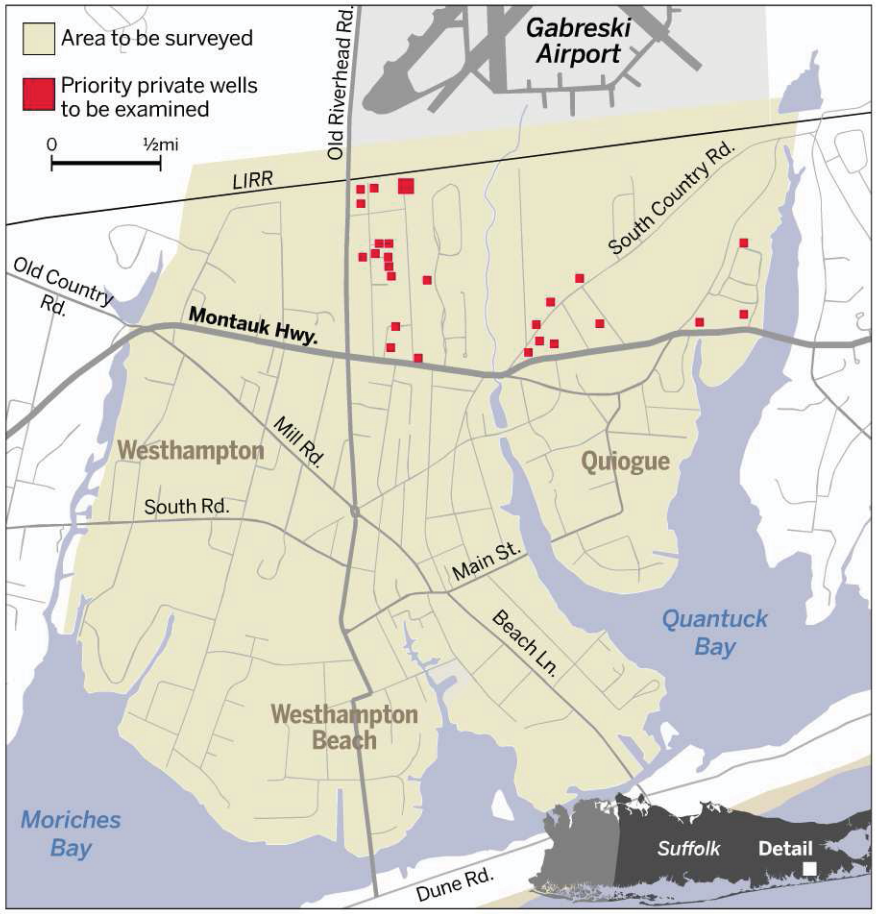
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Inside ExploreLI

Worries over

Private wells to be tested after hazardous chemical is found in the groundwater near Gabreski Airport



EXPLAINING THE CHEMICAL

- PFOS is a fluorinated organic chemical that this year was listed as hazardous by New York State. It has several possible negative health effects, including on fetal development and the immune system.
- Residents on private wells south of Gabreski Airport who are concerned about PFOS and want their wells tested can call Suffolk County at 631-852-5810 or email pfcquestions@suffolkcountyny.gov.
- For more information on PFOS and the potential health effects, call the New York State Water Quality Hotline at 800-801-8092.

BY JENNIFER BARRIOS
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Suffolk County is trying to find out if a hazardous chemical found in groundwater near Gabreski Airport in Westhampton Beach has affected private wells in the area.

County officials are going door to door south of the airport, offering residents whose homes rely on private wells bottled water for cooking and drinking, and offering free testing for the presence of PFOS, a fluorinated organic chemical that this year was listed as hazardous by New York State.

The bottled water, which the county began distributing yesterday, is a precautionary measure in response to an investigation the state Department of Environmental Conservation revealed in a letter this month after elevated levels of PFOS were first detected in public wells two years ago near the airport.

PFOS is an ingredient in firefighting foam that had been used at the Suffolk County Air National Guard base at the airport in training and fire-suppression exercises, according to the state, which suspects the foam to be the cause of the groundwater contamination.

Suffolk County Department of Health Services Commissioner Dr. James Tomarken said PFOS-containing foam has been used at the airport since the 1970s. It was phased out for training purposes in 2014, and the state Office of Fire Prevention and Control has set a deadline of April 25, 2017, for substances containing the chemical to be phased out from use entirely.

The New York State Air National Guard referred questions on the issue to the DEC.

Martin Brand, deputy commissioner for the DEC office of remediation and materials management, said the historical use

tainted water



ED BETZ

Abdul Sada, right, from the county executive's office, hands bottles of water to Isaac Green outside his Westhampton Beach home.

of the foam at the airport did not appear to violate any regulations.

"At this point, we don't have any evidence of improper use," he said.

Three wells tested positive

The county health department installed four groundwater-monitoring wells south of the airport beginning last month, and three of the four have tested positive for PFOS, said Jason Heim, supervisor of the department's bureau of drinking water.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has set a health advisory level of 0.07 parts per billion for PFOS — a level over which action to avoid exposure is recommended.

Preliminary data from one of the monitoring wells found levels of PFOS at 14.3 parts per billion.

"We haven't yet put that in perspective," said Amy Juchatz, a toxicologist with the county health department. "But it certainly is a cause for concern and drives us to do the private well testing."

Brand said two Suffolk County Water Authority wellfields south of the airport had been taken out of service last year due to PFOS levels.

The authority this year installed treatment systems at the wellfields to remove the chemical, and the water delivered to the public has no detectable PFOS levels, water authority spokesman Tim Motz said.

But still of concern are the estimated 75 to 150 private wells south of the airport.

Yesterday, the county began sending staffers to homes on private wells south of the Long Island Rail Road tracks and east of Beaverdam Creek and west of Quantuck Creek in Westhampton, offering free testing and bottled water for residents to use as they wait for test results.

"We are in an overabundance of caution going to directly reach out, door by door, people who are on private wells to essentially ask permission to test their wells," County Executive Steve Bellone said. "Anyone who's on public water, there's no concern."

PFOS is considered a contaminant of emerging concern, meaning its potential negative effects are not fully monitored or understood.

While PFOS is listed as hazardous by the state, the exact health effects of the chemical, which also is found in Teflon, Scotchgard and certain types of carpeting, remain unclear, Tomarken said.

"It's not a well-known entity. It's not well-studied," he said.

Dr. Nathan Graber, director of the center for environmental health at the state Department of Health, said studies have found possible effects on blood, the immune system, thyroid and fetal growth, but there is "very limited evidence" it can cause cancer.

'Reducing actual exposure'

"People are concerned because of what they don't know, and so Suffolk County is offering the bottled water until they have the results of the actual testing," Graber said. "In all cases, it's really about reducing actual exposure."

And, he said, "just because you exceed a health-advisory level doesn't mean health effects will occur."

The county must seek permission to test from owners of private wells. It plans to conduct testing for thousands of contaminants in addition to PFOS, said Walter Dawydiak, director of the county health department's Division of Environmental Quality.

If elevated levels in a private well are found, the county recommends that the homeowner connect to the public water supply, if possible, or install a carbon treatment system to rid the water of the chemical.

"We are currently working with Suffolk County officials to test private wells in the neighborhood for the presence of PFOS and to determine the cost of connecting those using private wells to public water provided by the Suffolk County Water Authority," Motz said.

The state's investigation, coupled with an investigation by the Air National Guard, is aimed at determining the extent and source of the contamination, Brand said.

The DEC will begin groundwater sampling next week, while a work plan by the National Guard Bureau is due in the fall, he said. Monitoring wells near the suspected areas of contamination also will be drilled, Brand said.

The effort is part of the state's Water Quality Rapid Response Team, an initiative set up in February by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's office to provide a swift state response to water contamination issues.

"The state is actively supporting Suffolk County and its residents in their efforts to determine if private wells are impacted, and is making every effort to expedite all work to identify the extent of the contamination and assure continued clean drinking water for the Westhampton Beach community," DEC spokesman Sean Mahar said in a statement.

Westhampton Beach resident Isaac Green received a visit and several bottles of water from a county worker yesterday.

Green said he was concerned about the possible contamination and planned to allow the county to test his well.

"Hopefully they do it pretty quickly," he said.