



CHEMTrust

Protecting humans and wildlife
from harmful chemicals

Emily Miles, CEO
Food Standards Agency
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Follow up on Ref: BC2019/00253

15 July 2021

Urgent action to ban PFAS chemicals in food packaging

Dear Emily Miles,

I am writing to you from CHEM Trust, an environmental NGO which focuses on chemicals policy and human health and the environment. This letter follows on from our letter dated 24th October 2019 asking about the action planned on the newly revised tolerable weekly intake of PFAS chemicals as recommended by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) Panel on Contaminants in the Food Chain (CONTAM) in March 2018ⁱ. We are writing to you again as CHEM Trust has been involved in a new investigation **revealing the presence of harmful and highly persistent PFAS chemicals in disposable food packaging from UK high street retailers**ⁱⁱ. We would like to request a meeting to discuss our findings and their implications for the management of PFAS chemicals.

In your response from 26th November 2019, you stated that *“risk management options for both PFAS as environmental contaminants and from use in food contact materials will be considered once the EFSA opinion has been finalised”*. Now that the EFSA opinion has been finalised and in light of the findings from our new investigation, **I am writing to urge you to revise the advice in the UK regarding the presence of PFAS in food and to ban the use of Per and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) in food packaging.**

New PFAS tolerable weekly intake

The final EFSA opinion was published in September 2020ⁱⁱⁱ with a new safety threshold for the sum of four PFAS which accumulate in the human body: perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS), perfluorononanoic acid (PFNA), perfluorohexane sulfonic acid (PFHxS). The recommended tolerable weekly intake (TWI) for the sum of these four PFAS is 4.4 ng/kg bw/week. This new re-evaluated TWI considered more recent scientific knowledge and is even lower than the recommended value we raised in our 2019 letter based on EFSA’s 2018 opinionⁱ.

The UK Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) has yet to revise the PFAS tolerable intake, as the recommendations from 2009 are still in

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place^{iv}. The current tolerable daily intake recommended for one PFAS, PFOA, is 1500 ng/kg bw/day. This is over 2000 higher than the tolerable intake recommended by EFSA for the sum of four PFAS, including PFOA. This is of great importance to human health as CONTAM concluded that “*parts of the European population exceed this TWI*”ⁱⁱⁱ.

PFAS use in food packaging in the UK

I would also like to highlight findings from our investigation which challenge some of the assumptions you identified in your 2019 letter regarding the use of PFAS chemicals to treat paper and cardboard food contact material in the UK:

- The view of the FSA in 2019 was that the food packaging industry in the UK had “*moved away from their [fluorinated compounds] use in favour of alternatives*”, however **our investigation showed that PFAS contamination is in fact pervasive in the paper and cardboard food packaging production**. Our investigation shows that cardboard pizza boxes unintentionally treated with PFAS chemicals had measurable levels of PFAS. This contamination is likely to be the consequence of their intentional use in the food packaging supply chain.
- “*Where they [fluorinated compounds] are used, they tend to fulfil very particular requirements. This includes a minority of speciality applications for moisture or grease resistance.*” Our investigation shows that food paper bags acquired on the UK market in 2020 from the brands McDonald’s, Pret A Manger, Greggs, the Co-op and Subways have been intentionally treated with PFAS chemicals. **Disposable packaging from big brand takeaway retailers cannot be described as a “minority of speciality applications”**.

The use of PFAS chemicals to treat high turnover, single use food packaging is highly problematic in terms of:

1. **Its contribution to overall PFAS pollution in the environment and long term PFAS exposure.** PFAS can be emitted in the environment at the production^v and disposal stage^{vi} of these products. Due to the extreme persistence of these chemicals, PFAS emitted today can still be present in the environment in several generations, impacting both human and wildlife.
2. **Its contribution to short term PFAS exposure.** Certain PFAS chemicals have been shown to migrate from paper and cardboard packaging into the food^{vii}. Their presence in food packaging from popular fast-food chain and restaurants is therefore a potential source of repeated direct exposure for the UK public.
3. **Its impact on the circular economy.** The use of PFAS chemicals in “*speciality*” food packaging has the potential to contaminate the paper and cardboard recycling chain. Representing a barrier to a clean and safe circular economy.

Our study shows that regulation is the most effective way of ensuring that harmful chemicals are not present in consumer products, including food packaging. In Denmark, where a ban on PFAS in food packaging has been in place since July 2020^{viii}, french fries’ bags from McDonald’s are not treated with PFAS chemicals. The same item was bought in the UK at the same time and was found to be treated with PFAS chemicals. Since our investigation, McDonald’s has announced its commitment to phase out all PFAS in its costumer products globally by 2025^{ix}. While this commitment is very welcome, **a clear legal framework is necessary to accelerate the move away from the use of PFAS in food packaging and ensure a level playing field for all companies.**

In light of these information, CHEM Trust is asking the FSA:

- 1. To revise the recommendations on PFAS tolerable intake in the UK to be in line with the final EFSA opinion of September 2020.**
- 2. To work with the UK government on a ban of the use of PFAS chemicals in paper, cardboard and moulded plant fibre materials in contact with food by 2022.**

We would like to request an online meeting with you to present our findings and their implications for the management of PFAS chemicals.

We thank you for considering our request and we look forward to receiving your reply.

Yours sincerely,



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In view of the public interest in this matter, we intend to make this letter publicly available.

ⁱ EFSA, 2018. Risk to human health related to the presence of perfluorooctane sulfonic acid and perfluorooctanoic acid in food. <https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/5194>

ⁱⁱ [Analysis of PFAS chemicals in takeaway food packaging from UK high street retailers](#). CHEM Trust, 2021. 13p. These results are part of a wider study where disposable food packaging and tableware from six countries have been analysed for their PFAS content: [Throwaway Packaging, Forever Chemicals: European wide survey of PFAS in disposable food packaging and tableware](#). Straková, J., Schneider, J., Cingotti, N. et al., 2021. 54p

ⁱⁱⁱ EFSA, 2020. Risk to human health related to the presence of perfluoroalkyl substances in food. <https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/6223>

^{iv} Committee on toxicity of chemicals in food, consumer products and the environment, July 2009. Update statement on the tolerable daily intake for perfluorooctanoic acid. COT statement 2009/02. <https://cot.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/cot/cotstatementpfoa200902.pdf>

^v Langberg, H.A., et al., 2020. Paper product production identified as the main source of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in a Norwegian lake: Source and historic emission tracking. *Environ Pollut*, 273: p. 116259. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envpol.2020.116259>

^{vi} Stoiber, T. et al., 2020. Disposal of products and materials containing per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS): A cyclical problem. *Chemosphere*, 260, p.127659. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chemosphere.2020.127659>

^{vii} Zabaleta, I., L. et al., 2020. "Occurrence of per-and polyfluorinated compounds in paper and board packaging materials and migration to food simulants and foodstuffs." *Food Chem* 321: 126746 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodchem.2020.126746>

^{viii} Ministry of Environment and Food of Denmark, Danish Veterinary and Food Administration, 2020. Ban on fluorinated substances in paper and board food contact materials (FCM). Factsheet, June 2020. <https://www.foedevarestyrelsen.dk/english/SiteCollectionDocuments/Kemi%20og%20foedevarekvalitet/UK-Fact-sheet-fluorinated-substances.pdf>

^{ix} CHEM Trust, 2020. McDonald's announces global PFAS ban in food packaging. <https://chemtrust.org/news/mcdonalds-pfas-ban/>