CHEMTrust
Protecting humans and wildlife from harmful chemicals

Rebecca Pow MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Defra
Seacole Building, 2 Marsham Street, London, SW1P 4DF

27 May 2021

Urgent action to ban PFAS chemicals in food packaging and other non-essential uses

Dear Rebecca Pow MP,

I'm writing to you from CHEM Trust, an environmental NGO which focuses on chemicals policy. 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**[i]. We would like to request a meeting to discuss our findings and their implications for the management of PFAS chemicals.

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, PFAS, are a group of over 4,500 synthetic chemicals[ii], known as the *'forever chemicals'* due to their extreme persistence in the environment**.** They are used in a wide variety of consumer products and industrial applications[iii], including food packaging.

PFAS are causing increasing concern due to their impacts on health and their widespread presence in our environment. A 2019 assessment by the Environment Agency has shown that PFOS, one of the PFAS chemicals, was widespread in English rivers and estuaries at levels often exceeding environmental standards[iv]. Scientific studies have associated exposure to a number of PFAS with severe adverse health effects, including cancer, impacts on the immune, reproductive and hormone systems, as well as reduced response to vaccinations[v].

The issue of the use of PFAS in food contact materials was raised with you in a joint letter sent by the charity Fidra in February 2020[vi], when the view of your Department[vii] was that it had not raised specific safety concerns to date. I would like to highlight findings

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from our investigation which challenge some of the assumptions you identified in your letter which informed this view:

- The view of your Department was that the food packaging industry in the UK had *"moved away from the use of fluorinated compounds in many paper and board products"*, 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 the consequence of their intentional use in the food packaging supply chain.
- "[fluorinated compounds] *are now predominantly used only in specialist packaging that have particular technical requirements, such as moisture or grease resistance*." Our investigation shows that 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 "specialist"**.
- *"There are strict migratory limits for specific PFAS that have been authorised for use in food contact plastics"*, however no such limits are in place for paper and board food packaging. This highlights that **current legislation transposed from the EU is insufficient in protecting consumers and our environment from exposure to hazardous chemicals in paper and board food packaging**.

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[viii] and disposal stage[ix] 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[x]. 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 *"specialist"* 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[xi], 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[xii]. 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.**

The UK Government has recently announced that it has asked the Health & Safety Executive and the Environment Agency to investigate the risks of PFAS and consider how to manage them. The regulatory management option analysis – RMOA – on PFAS is very

welcome but falls short of the comprehensive set of actions at EU level to address the use of and contamination with PFAS, including steps towards a group restriction[xiii].

CHEM Trust urges the UK Government to:

1. **Ban the use of all PFAS chemicals, including fluorinated polymers, in disposable food packaging and tableware by 2022.**
2. **Restrict the use of all PFAS chemicals, including fluorinated polymers, in all non-essential uses, including disposable food packaging and tableware by 2025.**

In our view, it is the only way to:

- Prevent emissions of all PFAS chemicals.
- Stop the accumulation of these highly persistent chemicals in the environment and our bodies.
- Protect UK citizens and wildlife from exposure to these harmful substances.

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,

Dr Anna Watson
Head of Advocacy
CHEM Trust

Attachment: Analysis of PFAS chemicals in takeaway food packaging from UK high street retailers. CHEM Trust, 2021. 13p.

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

[i] 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

[ii] OECD, 2018. Toward a new comprehensive global database of per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFASs): summary report on updating the OECD 2007 list of per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFASs). Series on Risk Management No. 39. http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=ENV-JM-MONO(2018)7&doclanguage=en

[iii] Glüge, J. et al., 2020. An overview of the uses of per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). Environmental Science: Processes & Impacts, 22(12), pp.2345-2373. https://doi.org/10.1039/D0EM00291G

[iv] Environment Agency, 2019. Perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) and related substances: sources, pathways and environmental data. https://consult.environment-agency.gov.uk/environment-and-business/challenges-and-choices/user_uploads/perfluorooctane-sulfonate-and-related-substances-pressure-rbmp-2021.pdf

[v] European Environmental Agency, 2019. Emerging chemical risks in Europe —'PFAS'. https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/emerging-chemical-risks-in-europe

[vi] https://chemtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/PFAS-Joint-Letter-to-Ministers_24Feb2020.pdf

[vii] https://chemtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/Defra-response_PFAS-joint-letter_20April2020.pdf

[viii] 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

[ix] 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

[x] 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

[xi] 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

[xii] CHEM Trust, 2020. McDonald's announces global PFAS ban in food packaging. https://chemtrust.org/news/mcdonalds-pfas-ban/

[xiii] European Commission, 2020. Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability. Towards a Toxic-Free Environment. https://ec.europa.eu/environment/pdf/chemicals/2020/10/Strategy.pdf