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HORSHAM WATER AND
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Editorial: Department of Defense unfairly hits back on state PFAS standards

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A federal drinking water standard would be best. But, absent that, our editorial board has consistently supported efforts in Pennsylvania to establish a statewide drinking water standard for toxic PFAS chemicals, which have been found in water wells used by more than 70,000 residents in Horsham, Warminster, Warrington and neighboring communities.

For decades, the military used firefighting foams containing PFAS chemicals — specifically PFOS and PFOA — at two former military bases in Horsham and Warminster and at a still-active station in Horsham. Scientists have linked some PFAS chemicals to ulcerative colitis, thyroid disease, reproductive issues and forms of cancer. Some residents who drank water from those wells believe the chemicals have been making them sick.

In November, we expressed hope and optimism that Pennsylvania's newly formed PFAS Action Team was working toward the creation of a statewide drinking water standard to bolster state and local agencies' ability to stop pollution and provide leverage to seek compensation from polluters responsible for contamination that exceeds the standard.

In January, we applauded freshman state Sen. Maria Collett's proposed drinking water standard of 10 parts for trillion for PFOS, PFOA and two other PFAS chemicals, which would be the strictest standard in the country. PFAS chemicals aren't regulated federally, but the EPA's advisory of 70 parts per trillion has been the de facto national standard. In cases where contamination has exceeded that threshold, the military has acted, spending tens of millions of dollars to provide filters and clean water in affected communities in Bucks and Montgomery counties.

So last week's report that the Department of Defense was ignoring or pushing back against state-set standards in places like New Mexico, Michigan and New York was particularly deflating. The reporting by Kyle Bagenstose and Jenny Wagner made it clear that getting a statewide standard in place is just half the battle. The other half would be getting the military to follow it.

We can see why. An estimate provided by the DOD's deputy assistant secretary for the environment put the cost of PFAS cleanup across the country at \$2 billion, and indications are that amount might be overly optimistic.

In New Mexico, the Air Force has sued the state Environmental Department, calling its state standard "arbitrary, capricious, an abuse of discretion and not supported by substantial evidence."

In Michigan, the Air Force sent a letter saying it would take no new action on a violation notice, that it had not waived its sovereign immunity and that the chemicals in question do not appear on a list of hazardous substances under the federal Superfund law.

In New York, the state sought reimbursement from the DOD for about \$50 million it spent providing clean drinking water to a city near an Air National Guard base. The DOD has not complied.

Such inaction also benefits the DOD since the military is spending millions researching how to deal with PFAS. Avoiding these issues buys the DOD time for those efforts to bear fruit.

But we find it very frustrating that, as our reporting has shown, the DOD was aware of the dangers related to PFAS way back in the mid-1990s. There was ample time to stop using the chemicals so vigorously and start studying how to clean them up. But here we are, 25 years later, watching the military continue to drag its feet and push back wherever possible to minimize its culpability and prolong or short-circuit state efforts to help affected residents.