

RECEIVED

JUN 17 2019

HORSHAM WATER AND  
SEWER AUTHORITY

# The Intelligencer

## Reporter's notebook: PFAS conference unveils global perspective

By Kyle Bagenstose

Posted Jun 14, 2019 at 1:52 PM

On Monday and Tuesday, I attended the second National Conference on PFAS chemicals at Northeastern University in Boston. It was an honor, as some element within the various organizing groups placed enough value on the reporting this news organization has produced on the topic over the past three years to invite me to speak on contamination in Bucks and Montgomery counties.

Going in, my "mission" was very focused. Deliver a pair of presentations, network, get story ideas, and remain objective. On most counts this was a success.

It was equal parts bizarre and interesting to put faces to names, many of which will be recognizable by readers who have followed our reporting: Maureen Sullivan, a top environmental official with the Department of Defense; Patrick Breyse, head of the ATSDR; Chris Higgins, a Colorado professor deep into researching PFAS science and solutions (I shared a panel with these three); and Rob Bilott, an Ohio attorney who in many ways first rang the public alarm on PFAS during litigation against DuPont.

I believe it's important for journalists to always remain skeptical, even of the most endearing people and causes. As the old reporter's joke goes, "If your mother tells you she loves you, check it out." So, presented with harrowing stories of personal tragedy from residents across the country and impassioned speeches from environmental groups, I still felt myself separate from many others. They shared a different mission than mine.

But there's a healthy limit to skepticism, and that's in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence. And what was made clear at this conference was the truly global scale of PFAS contamination, and the fact that our communities are

unfortunately at the very front lines of one of our era's foremost environmental challenges.

Science author Rebecca Altman traced the fascinating history of fluorochemistry, from origins in the Manhattan Project to PFAS' global spread through the use of nonstick Teflon pans, Scotchguard, firefighting foams, and other products. Krystle Mitchell, with South Australia's Metropolitan Fire Service, flew from across the world to explain how they'd found high levels of PFAS in the eggs of chickens raised near remote fire stations, unknowingly chowed down on by protein-hungry first responders.

Another scientist explained, the alarm ringing in her voice, that she knew harmful PFAS chemicals were still being mass-produced in places like China because it was showing up in her area of interest, the Arctic. Then an activist from Italy showed data of high PFAS blood levels in people living near Venice.

There are many disputed areas of the PFAS "universe," among them the exact level of toxicity, who should be held responsible for pollution, and the appropriate level of response and concern.

But indisputable at this point is that we're all affected. Because PFAS chemicals don't break down, they're in the bodies of more than 98% of Americans. They're almost certainly in my blood, your blood, and the blood of everyone you know. They build up in organs and cross the placenta in utero. They're in our streams, our plants, our pets, and our food.

What's also clear is few communities anywhere have been as impacted as Horsham, Warminster and Warrington. Through unique and unfortunate circumstances, the scope and scale of the contamination here is among the worst known anywhere, and the story of these towns will be recorded in history. It's a role no one asked for, but many chapters are yet unwritten.

An environmental issue of global scale came to a head in a sleepy corner of southeast Pennsylvania.

What happens next?