Case study

Good science shifts public concern

Community concern over PFCs identified in drinking water eased through public outreach education and developing a collaborative relationship with regulators.

Site scenario

To obtain site closure approval from the State and Regional EPA, sampling for perfluorinated compounds (PFCs) was required since aqueous film forming foam (AFFF) was used throughout the site for nearly 30 years. The sampling identified PFCs in groundwater, surface water and within a drinking water supply well with concentrations significantly above EPA Permissible Health Advisories (PHAs).

Response

We assembled a team of experts in PFC chemistry, water treatment and emerging contaminant site investigation and local regulators. The team was specifically designed to build credibility and trust with the affected community, water utility, regulators and our customer's senior management. We trained front-line staff in program-specific quality procedures and external PFC messaging. We implemented a communications plan that increased collaboration among stakeholders, regulators and the community. Parents of children who attend a daycare that used drinking water supplied by one of the wells were most concerned. The pressures put on the daycare owners by the parents were immense. To support the daycare owners, we met with them to explain the situation and advised them on responding to parent inquiries.

This important, face-to-face community outreach reinforced our client's commitment to protect public health.

The EPA is requiring our client to attain PHA cleanup requirements under a Safe Drinking Water Act Administrative Order. While helping our client comply with the order, we are taking parallel actions to design two PFC removal treatment plants and rapidly collect and assess the preponderance of data that will be used to potentially reduce the requirements of the order.

Building a collaborative relationship with regulators

Impacts of bedrock groundwater discharging to surface water required a pore water survey. We invited the EPA regulator to participate in the pore water survey by executing the field work with us, which went a long way toward building a trusting relationship and confidence in the data collected. By sharing data and inviting the EPA to partner on part of the field program, regulator personnel became confident in the approach, quality and technical expertise we provided on behalf of our client. Additionally, we held regular data review sessions to discuss data collected and seek input from the regulators on data gaps.

Results

Our efforts to build a trusting relationship with regulators has resulted in expedited document reviews and approvals, approved schedule extensions, and a successful partnership with community stakeholders. In the 15 months following our involvement with the project, press coverage of the site contamination has gone from weekly occurrences of negative press to infrequent coverage centered on the state's program for PFC blood serum testing. The relationship between regulators and our client began with mistrust and contention. By assisting our client to develop a thorough communication strategy and ease community concerns through education, they have substantially improved their image among the regulators and within the community.