

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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August 13, 2020

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro,

For decades, industry has created thousands of different per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances—also known as PFAS—for use in cookware, food packaging, firefighting foam, and textiles.¹ These synthetic chemicals can now be found in the body of virtually every person in America.² They do not break down easily, can spread quickly through the environment and are associated with a long list of harmful health effects, including cancer.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is leading the Federal effort to understand and reduce PFAS risks to the public through implementation of its 2019 PFAS Action Plan.³ The Action Plan identifies near-term and long-term research activities needed to identify and mitigate risk from PFAS in the environment, while also revealing key knowledge gaps related to PFAS hazard and toxicity, exposure, treatment and remediation, and science communication.

It is critically important that the Federal Government build upon the Action Plan by identifying and investing in cross-cutting, interagency research and development (R&D) opportunities to address the environmental and health effects of PFAS. Earlier this year, EPA committed to expanding its research efforts and enhancing its engagement with the rest of the Federal Government.⁴ We support this engagement and believe a coordinated Federal response that draws on the expertise of multiple agencies, such as the National Institute of Standards and Technology and the National Science Foundation, will accelerate progress on this important

¹ <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/toxic-drinking-water-pfas-contamination-fs.pdf>

² <https://www.nrdc.org/media/2020/200629-1>

³ https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2019-02/documents/pfas_action_plan_021319_508compliant_1.pdf

⁴ https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-01/documents/pfas_action_plan_feb2020.pdf

public health issue. In this context, we ask the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) to examine the following agency roles and actions:

- What progress has the EPA made on the near-term and long-term research activities outlined in its PFAS Action Plan?
 - To what extent has the Action Plan improved communication between Federal agencies and streamlined Federal action on PFAS R&D?
- How effectively has the Federal Government coordinated PFAS R&D activities across different agencies?
 - Has this coordination included interagency goals, priorities, and metrics for tracking progress and success?
 - How have Federal agencies collaborated with state and local jurisdictions, academia, industry, non-government organizations, and other stakeholders?

Further, as Members of the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, we believe a thorough understanding of the current state of PFAS science is critical to understanding the extent of the problem, cleaning up contaminated sites, addressing health effects, and setting future policy. In this context, we ask GAO to examine the following:

- What is the state of our scientific understanding of PFAS on the following topics?
 - Increased understanding of direct and indirect PFAS exposure pathways;
 - Increased understanding of PFAS toxicity;
 - Increased understanding of the extent and implications of PFAS contamination;
 - New treatment and disposal technologies;
 - New analytical methods to detect and quantify PFAS, including any potential use of artificial intelligence and/or machine learning; and
 - Deployment of safer, alternative substances similar in function to PFAS.
- What are the remaining scientific and technological knowledge gaps, and how are Federal programs and investments currently aligned to address those gaps?
- What resource constraints, if any, do Federal agencies face in ensuring continuity of PFAS R&D?
- How can PFAS R&D more effectively inform Federal policymaking?
- To what extent are Federal agencies considering vulnerable populations and other social science factors into PFAS R&D and risk communication—and what challenges, if any, exist in doing so?

Recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a statement about the potential intersection between PFAS and COVID-19, citing evidence that PFAS exposure reduces antibody responses to vaccines and resistance to infectious diseases.⁵ We believe investments in PFAS R&D have never been more important and appreciate your assistance with this matter. If you have any questions, please contact Priyanka Hooghan of the Majority Committee staff at 202-225-6375.

⁵ https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/pfas/health-effects/index.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.atsdr.cdc.gov%2Fpfas%2FPFAS-health-effects.html

Sincerely,



Lizzie Fletcher
Chair
Subcommittee on Energy
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology



Mikie Sherrill
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Environment
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology



Haley Stevens
Chairwoman
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