

News Release

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Reckless Rush to Burn AFFF Endangers Communities Across US

New Data Reveals 1/3 of Military's Stockpile of AFFF Burned at Norlite in Cohoes, NY

Bennington College is launching a new interactive website that compiles all known shipments of Aqueous Fire Fighting Foam (AFFF) to hazardous waste incinerators in the United States between 2016-2020. There is no evidence that incineration destroys this toxic firefighting foam.

Since 2016, the Department of Defense and others rushed to incinerate huge stockpiles of AFFF, a toxic firefighting foam linked to a host of cancers, developmental disorders, immune dysfunction, and infertility. AFFF was sent to a handful of hazardous waste incinerators located in poor and working class communities. During this time the EPA, scientists, and even the military itself all warned that incineration was an unproven, risky, and ill-advised means to dispose of AFFF. Ignoring such sound science, the Department of Defense oversaw the incineration of over 20 million pounds of AFFF between 2016-2020. The American public has been kept in the dark about this reckless and potentially criminal effort to burn AFFF.

“In defiance of common sense and environmental expertise, the Department of Defense has enlisted poor communities across the US as unwilling test subjects in its toxic experiment with burning AFFF. The data we’ve compiled today and are making public for the first time demonstrates just how harebrained this entire operation is and its impact on environmental justice communities. In effect, the Pentagon redistributed its AFFF problem into poor and working class neighborhoods across the US. Burning AFFF is an unproven method and dangerous mix that threatens the health of millions of Americans,” said David Bond, Associate Director of the Center for the Advancement of Public Action at Bennington College.

This website – www.bennington.edu/AFFF – organizes all data about AFFF incineration and allows community groups, journalists, and legislators to interact with the data according to their own concerns. This is the first time all of this data has been gathered in one place and the first time it has all been publicly accessible.

“Congress needs to throw cold water on the Pentagon’s mad dash to burn toxic firefighting foam. There is no evidence that incineration destroys AFFF. As the data shared today shows, we have a national problem on our hands. We need a national ban on burning these forever chemicals,” said Judith Enck, former EPA Regional Administrator.

“We simply must stop burning PFAS compounds. Attempting to burn these forever chemicals can generate highly toxic emissions which endanger the health of nearby communities. Burning also releases gases which are powerful climate forcing chemicals. EPA and DOD are both

pursuing advanced technologies that can more effectively destroy these compounds without causing these unacceptable impacts,” stated Jane Williams, chair of the Sierra Club’s National Clean Air Team.

In 2020, Bennington College obtained four documents listing shipments of AFFF to incinerators. Two documents originated with the Defense Department and two originated with New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Compiling and analyzing these shipments of AFFF helped bring the scale of this environmental justice issue into sharp and urgent focus. Here is some of what we learned:

- Over 20 million pounds of the toxic firefighting foam AFFF and AFFF wastewater was incinerated between 2016-2020.
- The US military, the EPA, and state regulators all expressed serious concern about the ability of incineration to destroy the toxic chemicals in AFFF during this time.
- Six incinerators were contracted to burn AFFF. Each is a habitual violator of environmental law. Since 2017, three of the incinerators were out of compliance with environmental law 100% of the time while the other incinerators were out of compliance with environmental law about 50% of the time.
- 35% of known shipments of AFFF (7.7 million pounds) was burned at the Norlite Hazardous Waste Incinerator in Cohoes, NY, located within a densely populated urban area and less than 400 feet from a public housing complex. Norlite burned 2.47 million pounds of AFFF and 5.3 million pounds of AFFF wastewater, which likely was burned in violation of its RCRA permit.
- 40% of national stockpile of AFFF (5.5 million pounds) was sent to “fuel-blending” facilities where it was mixed into fuels for industrial use. It is not clear where the AFFF laden fuel went next, although the DOD contract stipulates incineration should be the endpoint. Where was it burned?
- 970,000 pounds of AFFF was burned overseas.

Our full analysis and all of our data can be found at: www.bennington.edu/AFFF.