



City To Investigate Accidental Release Of PFAS-Laced Foam At Airport

By Beth Milligan | March 2, 2021

Traverse City commissioners want more information before paying more than \$40,000 in clean-up costs after city firefighters were involved in two accidental releases of contaminant-laced foam during recent training exercises at Cherry Capital Airport. The foam contained per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), harmful yet widely used chemicals in firefighting foam and other industrial applications. Commissioners want staff

to investigate whether the airport – which contracts with the Traverse City Fire Department for services – or the city should be responsible for payment and whether insurance policies could help cover the costs.

According to TCFD Chief Jim Tuller, the first and most significant accident occurred on airport property on November 28. Firefighters were conducting a training exercise with an airport-owned crash-fire truck when the operator accidentally pressed the foam system switch, which is located directly next to the water system switch. A foam and water mixture was discharged onto an unpaved area of the airfield. The truck was shut down and an investigation immediately carried out by airport and TCFD staff. Both Northern A-1 Environmental Services and Team Elmer's responded to the clean-up scene, with the incident reported as required by law to the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes & Energy (EGLE).

A second, smaller incident occurred on December 5 involving the same truck during a routine systems check, according to Tuller. A truck operator was discharging water onto an approved paved surface location and noticed foam mixed in with the water. The truck was shut down and an investigation carried out to examine the discharge. Northern A-1 Environmental Services again responded to the accident, which was reported to EGLE.

While Tuller acknowledged a TCFD operator was at fault for the first incident, he said there was disagreement on the second accident. Airport officials believed the accident to be the result of operator error, but Tuller believed it to be a mechanical failure of the airport's truck "due to an improper and incomplete flushing of the foam discharge system" following the November 28 incident. Northern A-1 Environmental Services' invoices for responding to the two cases totaled \$33,526, while the Team Elmer's bill came in at \$6,825. Though Tuller said \$5,437 of the costs are still in dispute, he recommended the city pay the invoices in full "to not penalize the contractors and seek further resolution at a future date."

Commissioners, however, decided to table the invoices Monday, saying they wanted city legal counsel to look into the contract between the city and airport to determine whether the airport bears any responsibility for clean-up costs. TCFD only uses PFAS-laced foam because the airport requires it under federal aviation guidelines, with some commissioners suggesting that that requirement – and the fact Tuller believed the second accident was a mechanical and not operator error – should take some responsibility off the city. Commissioner Tim Werner said it was "outrageous" for the city to be on the hook for 100 percent of liability related to required airport training exercises and suggested reevaluating the contract between the airport and the city. Other commissioners agreed ↑

and asked staff to investigate whether the airport's insurance policy might cover any clean-up expenses. City Clerk Benjamin Marentette said the city's own insurance policy – which does include coverage for PFAS clean-up – has a \$25,000 deductible for claims. Each of the individual clean-up invoices related to the two airport accidents came in under that amount, so the “city doesn't have a viable claim” it can make on its policy, Marentette said.

Staff agreed to further research the contract and bring the invoices back for discussion at the next commission meeting. In a statement to The Ticker, Cherry Capital Airport Director Kevin Klein said he had not watched the meeting, but expressed his willingness to engage in discussions, saying: “We have a longstanding relationship with the city fire department, and I'm confident we can work through this.”

In the meantime, Tuller told commissioners that the TCFD has taken steps to prevent future mishaps. A protective cover has been installed over the foam system switches in both crash-fire trucks to prevent another accidental activation during training. The covers can be easily removed during emergencies, Tuller said. Going forward, water system checks will only occur on paved surfaces in defined areas of the airport, and all TCFD members have been trained on new protocols regarding apparatus checks and foam concentrate and operations.

PFAS were already an issue in East Bay Township before the two incidents, with state officials finding the chemicals in 18 nearby residential drinking wells last fall (<https://www.traverseticker.com/news/gt-county-commissioners-delay-action-on-clous-resolution-approve-funding-for-pfas-contaminated-wells/>). The owners of those properties have been offered the chance to connect to the township water supply at no expense to avoid further use of the wells. Airport and U.S. Coast Guard officials are investigating possible contamination sources; no direct link has yet been established between their properties and the PFAS-polluted groundwater, though firefighting foam has been used as part of training exercises for decades on the sites.

In a Facebook post Sunday, the Traverse City Firefighters Association Local 646 noted some of the challenges in transitioning away from firefighting foam containing PFAS, particularly given that the dangers of the chemicals have only become known in recent years. “PFAS foam has and will continue to be used in the airport fire trucks until the industry powers at be figure out a long-term solution for the existing product and validate a sufficient alternative,” the association wrote. “It has been used for decades because it is

really good at suffocating large fuel fires associated with aircraft crashes. The airport currently uses the same foam they have used for many years. It was only in recent months and years that the danger had become widely known."

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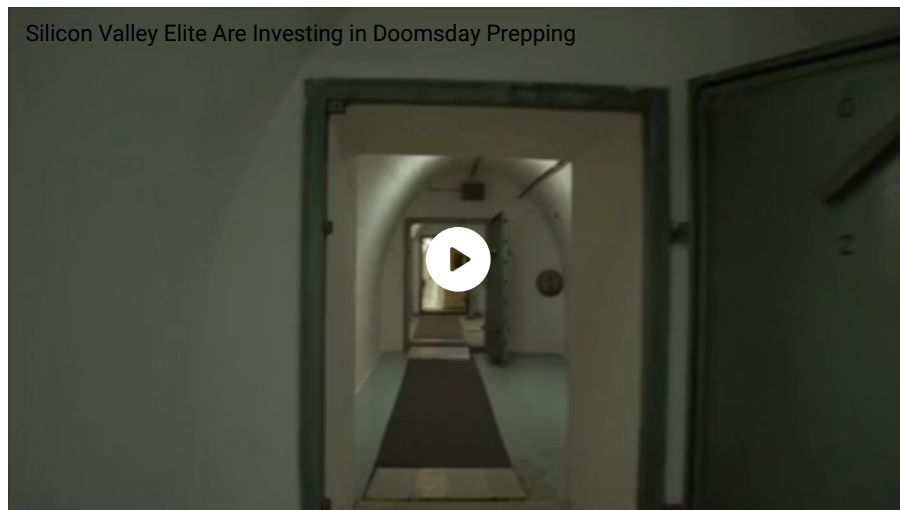
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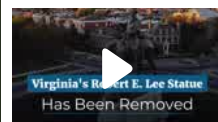
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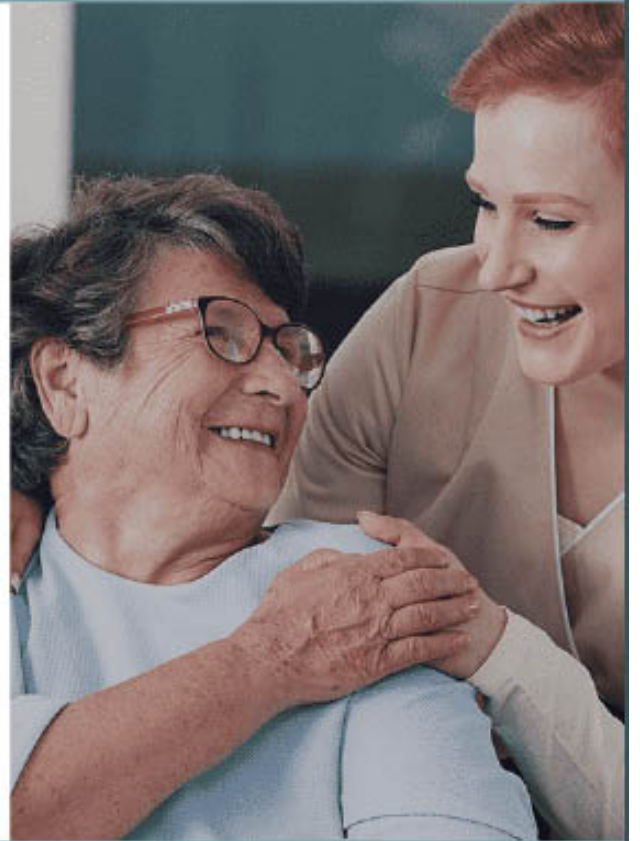
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