
1 December 2022

EPA consultation on PFAS waste disposal application

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) will undertake formal community consultation on an application to allow PFAS-contaminated waste to be disposed of at the Cleanaway Inkerman landfill, north of Adelaide.

Waste Management Pacific SA (Cleanaway) applied to the EPA to add pre-treated PFAS-contaminated solid waste — certified to contain less than 50 mg per kg of per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) — to its existing EPA landfill licence at Inkerman.

Cleanaway's application is the second received by the EPA since it released the landfill disposal criteria for PFAS-contaminated waste in 2020.

The EPA refused a previous application at McLaren Vale in 2021 due to the location; the fractured rock aquifer beneath the site meant that any failure of the landfill liner would have been difficult to contain and would rely upon immediate intervention.

The EPA has since undertaken further work regarding the broader policy and operational management of PFAS-contaminated waste in South Australia, including developing draft site selection factors specific to South Australia to assist the assessment of applications. These guidelines are being finalised in preparation for community consultation in early 2023.

All landfills are likely to contain PFAS-contaminated waste from everyday household products. However, remediated waste soils from a known PFAS-contaminated site are currently not approved for disposal anywhere in South Australia.

South Australia is the only jurisdiction in Australia that doesn't have landfills where PFAS-contaminated waste can be disposed of.

Until a landfill has been assessed as appropriate to dispose of this waste, it must remain on-site or be transported interstate.

South Australian legislation requires the EPA to engage with nearby property owners in relation to the Cleanaway application for a period of not less than 14 days. The EPA would like to receive and consider submissions from residents surrounding the Inkerman site and the broader community.

The nearby community was first informed of the application in 2020 and has had regular updates through the established Inkerman Landfill Community Reference Group, which meets three times a year.

An online engagement portal has been set up with further information and frequently asked questions. www.engage.epa.sa.gov.au/inkerman. The public consultation period will run for three months.

A community information session will be held on 9 February 2023 to enable interested people to talk with staff from Cleanaway, the EPA and SA Health.

EPA Director Operations Andrew Pruszinski said the EPA's role in regulating waste management included ensuring all reasonable measures were taken to protect the environment, as well as considering the impacts that extreme weather events might have on the proposal and the inter-generational equity for the next generation of community.

He said Cleanaway had been required to undertake a formal assessment of potential risks to human health and the environment.

Its specialist environmental consultant found that the local groundwater is highly saline and has limited-to-no value for drinking or primary industry. There are no operational bores within 2km in any direction.

"The EPA's criteria for the disposal of PFAS-contaminated waste were published in March 2020," Mr Pruszinski said.

"The Inkerman facility has undergone significant prior development assessment and technical assessment by the EPA and other authorities. This includes the addition of PFAS to the site's annual groundwater monitoring program, commissioning a Human Health and Ecological Risk Assessment, and engagement with the surrounding residents.

"It also has a number of primary controls in place, such as suitable siting control measures, that were not available to the McLaren Vale site.

"The geotechnical environment at the Inkerman site is suited to containment of the groundwater, primarily with the deeper sedimentary aquifer and slow-moving groundwater conditions.

"Inkerman was a state-planned landfill site and is a long distance away from major population hubs and bore water users."

The Human Health and Ecological Risk Assessment found that under a 'catastrophic failure' scenario, PFAS in leachate would take about 240 years and 1190 years respectively to reach the Clinton Wetland and Gulf St Vincent waters. This would be detected, allowing sufficient time for intervention.

The receipt of the assessment report was the final step required for Cleanaway's application to progress to formal public notification under the Environment Protection Act 1993. The assessment report is available on the EPA website.

PFAS are manufactured chemicals that have been used for more than 50 years and make products non-stick, water repellent and fire, weather and stain resistant. They have been used in a range of consumer products and firefighting foams, pesticides and stain repellents. This means most landfills in the world are likely to already contain levels of PFAS.

State and territory governments have been aiming to prevent further PFAS releases into the environment. In 2018 South Australia was the first to ban fire-fighting foams containing PFAS.

Submissions on the Cleanaway application can be made until 28 February 2023.

