

Press Release

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Widespread Water Contamination by 'Forever Breakdown Product' of PFAS Pesticides

Pesticide Action Network Europe and its member organisations [expose dirty PFAS legacy under the radar](#) - swift political action required.

Brussels, May 27, 2024 - An exploratory joint survey of 23 surface and six groundwater samples from ten EU countries, conducted by member organisations of the European Pesticide Action Network, has revealed alarming levels of the little-known and largely unregulated 'forever chemical' TFA (Trifluoroacetic acid). The contamination is not related to industrial hotspots, it is widespread, with remarkably high concentrations in agricultural areas.

TFA is a degradation product of PFAS pesticides, F-gases and other forever chemicals (PFAS). The concentrations found in the water samples averaged 1,180 nanograms per litre (ng/l). This is 70 times higher than the average concentration of all other examined PFAS combined (17.5 ng/l), including well-known "[hot-spot](#)" PFAS. In 23 of the 29 water samples (79%), TFA concentrations exceeded the proposed limit value for 'PFAS Total' in the EU drinking water directive. None of the other PFAS analysed exceeded their corresponding limit values.

"TFA can be found far from industrial regions at high levels. Our data paint an alarming picture of widespread water contamination by a little-known but highly persistent and very mobile 'forever chemical'. Comparable high concentrations of more prominent PFAS are usually only encountered at contamination hot spots," says Helmut Burtscher-Schaden, Biochemist at the environmental organisation GLOBAL 2000: *"The PFAS problem, which for 25 years has primarily been understood as a problem of highly contaminated but localised hotspots, has now spread to all bodies of water."*

To our knowledge, most of the 27 EU countries do not monitor TFA levels in surface, groundwater, or drinking water, nor are such data publicly available. Notable exceptions include Germany, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.

Double Failure of Authorities and Politics

The German Environment Agency UBA recently [identified](#) PFAS pesticides as the likely dominant source of TFA water contamination in rural areas. The EU pesticide regulation requires that pesticides are only approved if their active substances and "relevant metabolites" (= degradation products) do not exceed concentrations of 100 ng/l in groundwater. The fact that all water samples far exceed this limit, yet PFAS pesticides remain approved, can be traced back to a fatal decision by EFSA over 20 years ago. In 2003, the agency concluded that TFA was considered a 'non-relevant metabolite', exempting it from all monitoring obligations and limits.

"The disastrous decision by EFSA to neglect TFA groundwater contamination secured the marketing of PFAS pesticides for manufacturers and laid the groundwork for what is arguably the largest and most pervasive contamination of European surface and groundwater by a man-made chemical in history", says Salomé Roynet, Policy Officer at PAN Europe.

However, the EU Water Framework Directive should also have prevented this contamination. In particular, it prohibits the chemical pollution of waters with chemicals like TFA. Article 4 explicitly requires Member States to "take the measures necessary to reverse any significant and sustained upward trend in the concentration of any pollutant resulting from the impact of human activity". Those 'necessary measures' demanded by law should undoubtedly have included a ban on PFAS pesticides and another group of PFAS, the so-called F-gases, which enter the atmosphere from industrial refrigerants in thousands of tons and then enter the global water cycle as TFA via rain.

Although TFA is the persistent end product of an estimated 2,000 PFAS compounds, there is little research on its toxicity to the environment and humans, as Dr. Pauline Cervan, a toxicologist at Generations Futures explains: *'Evidence of dangerous properties of TFA was recently uncovered in an industry-commissioned animal study, in which TFA caused severe malformations in rabbit babies whose mothers were exposed to TFA during pregnancy. In recent years, European and U.S. authorities have repeatedly revised their toxicity assessments for some relatively well-studied PFAS and set limits in the single nanogram range. We can only hope that TFA does not ultimately prove to be similarly toxic.'*

The German Federal Office for Chemicals recently informed the European Chemical Agency (ECHA) of its intention to propose linking TFA to reproductive toxicity.

The extent of the detected TFA contamination requires swift and decisive action, including (i) a rapid ban on PFAS pesticides, (ii) the implementation of the general PFAS restriction under the REACH chemicals regulation, (iii) the classification of TFA as a "priority substance" under the Water Framework Directive, and (iv) monitoring obligations and limits for TFA", demand PAN Europe and its member organisations.

Read more:

- Report: [TFA in Water: Dirty PFAS Legacy Under the Radar](#)
- Letter: [Concerns regarding risk assessment of PFAS active substances used in pesticides and their residues in food, and meeting request | PAN Europe](#)

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Pesticide Action Network (PAN Europe) is a network of NGOs working to reduce the use of hazardous pesticides and have them replaced with ecologically sound alternatives. We work to eliminate dependency on chemical pesticides and to support safe sustainable pest control methods. Our network brings together over 45 consumer, public health and environmental organisations and women's groups from across Europe.

