

Joel Widenor
Brunswick, ME
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Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
Maine Legislature

Re: Support for LD 400 Reporting Requirement, LD 222: AFFF Take-Back Program, and LD 407 Brunswick Landing Cleanup by 2026.

Dear Chairperson Doudera and Members of the Committee,

My name is Joel Widenor, and I am a resident of Brunswick Landing, where an environmental disaster occurred on August 19, 2024 due to an entirely preventable spill of toxic aqueous film-forming foam (AFFF). This horrific event was the largest of several that have occurred on the watch of the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority (MRRRA), ranking as the largest ever in Maine and the sixth-largest in U.S. history. Given the evolving impacts from this event that have left our community reeling, I am writing in strong support of LD 407, which requires the removal of all remaining AFFF from Brunswick Landing by 2026. Since there is currently little to no oversight or local control of MRRRA, this bill provides the path to require the action that citizens and local representatives have been demanding from MRRRA for over six months.

To ensure that other Maine citizens do not have to endure a similar catastrophe, I am also writing in clear support of LD 400, which seeks to establish reporting requirements for AFFF storage, and LD 222, which creates a take-back program for AFFF to ensure safe collection, storage, and disposal.

The Ongoing Impacts and Risks

The August 2024 spill at Brunswick Landing starkly displays the dangers presented by AFFF to our waterways, wildlife, fisheries, and communities. As you are fully aware, a mixture of 1,450 gallons of AFFF concentrate and 50,000 gallons of water surged into the environment, and the outfall from this disaster continues to contaminate Mere Brook, Harpswell Cove, the Androscoggin River, and possibly other local waterways. In addition, the full extent of impact on fish and animals due to soil and surface water contamination is still not fully determined, as testing has been limited.

The toxic PFAS chemicals in AFFF are known to persist in the environment indefinitely, posing significant risks to human health, wildlife, and water quality. Studies link PFAS exposure to serious health effects, including cancer, immune system suppression, and developmental issues in children. And the threats found from PFAS continue to become more serious as the body of scientific research grows, suggesting that the health and environmental risks are likely to expand further in the coming years.

This threat is especially highlighted by the current situation in Brunswick, where the current and future risks to public and private drinking water supplies persist. In addition, the contamination continues to directly impact residents who rely on local waterways for their livelihoods. If yet another AFFF spill was to occur, the significant risk remains for the threats to our health and the environment to become even more severe.

Critical Solutions These Bills Provide

LD 407 ensures the removal of all remaining AFFF from Brunswick Landing by 2026, eliminating the risk of yet another major spill by MRRA at this site. Citizens and local representatives have been clear that this step is needed to ensure compliance by MRRA, since there has not been any clear commitment forthcoming from MRRA during the past six months despite repeated requests.

LD 400 establishes a critical reporting system for locations storing AFFF, empowering the Maine DEP to monitor and address potential risks. LD 222 takes this one step further by creating a take-back program to safely collect and store AFFF until a safe disposal method is available. Together, these bills take a proactive approach to preventing future contamination and protecting Maine's waterways and the health of Maine residents.

A View From Brunswick Landing: We Deserve a Voice

On the morning of August 19, 2024, it was hours after the disastrous AFFF spill when I first became aware. Despite living/working within walking distance of sites impacted by this toxic threat, the information flow from MRRA to the public during a public emergency was sluggish at best. In the days, weeks, and months that followed, a similar slow, reluctant, and resistant theme has prevailed in MRRA communications. Citizens and town representatives have spent countless hours educating, advocating, and communicating concerns to MRRA. As documents were slowly released following the spill, it eventually came to light that [MRRA failed over a prolonged period to make needed repairs](#) to the AFFF system that malfunctioned. In addition, at least two prior AFFF spills (2012 and 2019) have occurred under MRRA management.

Despite the neglect, accidents, mismanagement, etc., MRRA has still not clearly committed to the removal of AFFF stocks that remain on site, and it now has become impossible to trust their competency to responsibly manage these toxic materials. Specific demands have been clearly made for the past six months by citizen groups and town representatives, particularly [regarding Hangar 6](#). Another AFFF spill from this location would likely [pose a direct threat to the public drinking water supply](#). In the meantime, the aftermath of the August spill is still playing out in real-time. Nearby residents with private wells remain at risk from the toxic plume. High PFAS concentrations continue to lead to closures of shellfish areas, and [PFAS discharges through Brunswick Sewer](#) continue to contaminate the Androscoggin River. Wildlife on and surrounding the property may very well be impacted due to contaminated soil/fish/water but have not yet been tested. Air testing months after the spill showed potentially elevated PFAS levels near residential areas on Brunswick Landing. We have essentially been left to deal with a cloud of persistent and constant uncertainty.

Despite the toxic impacts that flow well beyond the property lines of MRRA, the current structuring of MRRA gives local citizens and town officials minimal direct influence over what occurs in this significant portion of our town. As you are aware, even the state has limited oversight capabilities in the absence of new legislation. I have unexpectedly found myself expending an enormous amount of time during the past six months advocating for AFFF and PFAS issues in Brunswick, and the results sometimes feel few and far between because MRRA has never shown interest in truly working with the community. However, these bills are a hopeful opportunity to hear the residents of Brunswick. Please help us make sure that the remaining AFFF is permanently removed so that we can focus on ways to heal from the damage that MRRA has already done to our community.

Why I Support This Legislation

- **Protecting Public Health/Environment:** Mainers deserve to live without fear of toxic chemicals in their drinking water, air, and soil. Responsible stewardship of clean waterways and a healthy environment are central to our way of life.
- **Providing Needed MRRA Oversight:** Brunswick residents are directly impacted by the looming threat of remaining AFFF stocks that put drinking water at risk daily. Since MRRA has lost public trust and not independently acted in response to community outcry during the past six months, this legislation gives back a voice that is deserved.
- **Addressing the Increasing Risks:** Unfortunately, delaying action can only increase the threats to health and the environment. Reported impacts from PFAS are increasingly concerning; following the lead of similar programs in states such as New Hampshire and Colorado will allow Maine to start providing a solution, rather than ignoring the inevitable.

In conclusion, **LD 400**, **LD 222**, and **LD 407** are essential steps to safeguarding Maine's environment, protecting public health, and ensuring responsible management of AFFF. In addition, these bills will finally enact the clear and continuous message demanding the removal of AFFF from MRRA property that has been voiced by the local community for the past six months. I urge you to vote in favor of these bills and take action to prevent further harm from PFAS chemicals and further acts of neglect and mismanagement by MRRA at Brunswick Landing.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Joel Widenor