

Issues regarding Camp Hansen and PFOS and Other Chemical Substances (PFOA, PFHxS) in Okinawa Prefecture, Japan

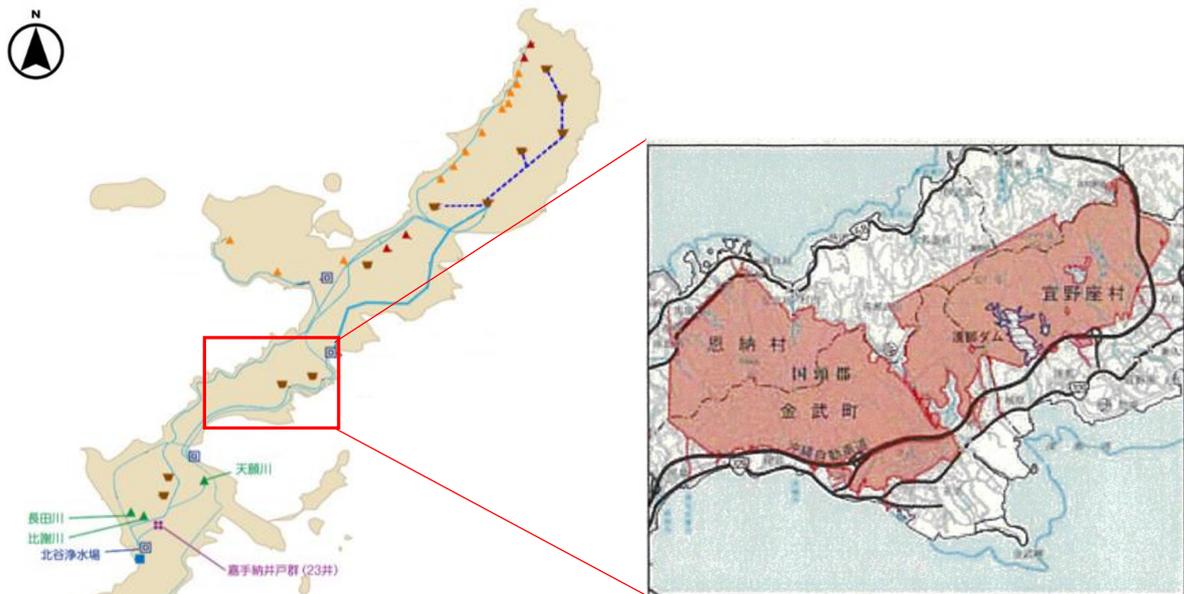
Okinawa Prefectural Government

Introduction

The Okinawa Prefectural Government (the OPG), in its role as a regional government, has conducted surveys of PFOS to understand more about the presence of these substances in the prefecture's environment. The surveys also found chemical substances that are related to PFOS like PFOA and PFHxS.

During these surveys, PFOS and related chemical substances were detected in several places in the prefecture, and high concentrations of PFOS and other chemical substances exceeding the national provisional standard value of 50ng/L around the US military bases, including Camp Hansen.

The OPG has applied to the US military for permission to conduct an on-site survey at Camp Hansen to identify the source of contamination, and has requested the Japanese government to work with the US to provide the OPG with access to the base for a survey, but permission has not been granted to date, which has caused great anxiety among local residents.



Camp Hansen

Survey and Detection Status of PFOS and other Chemical Substances (PFOA, PFHxS) in the Areas around Camp Hansen

In June 2020, the Kin Town Office (KTO), a municipality in northern Okinawa Prefecture, conducted water quality testing in the areas around Camp Hansen, a US military base. During the water quality testing, PFOS and other chemical substances were detected, with readings of 87-410ng/L in the wells of Kin No. 2, 3 and 4, which are the sources for the Kin Water Treatment Plant, and Warumibaru No.1, which is a source for the Namisato Water Treatment Plant. The testing also detected readings of 70ng/L in the tap water of the Kin Water Treatment Plant, and 50ng/L in the tap water of the Namisato Water Treatment Plant. Following the testing, the KTO stopped taking water from some of its wells in July 2020.

In October 2021, the OPG released through the news media the results of a water quality testing survey for PFOS and other chemical substances that had been conducted at water treatment plants across six (6) municipalities in northern Okinawa Prefecture that are located around US military bases. The survey showed that the PFOS values for all of the municipalities except for Kin Town were below the provisional target values.

In December 2021, the OPG applied to the US military for permission to conduct an on-site survey at Camp Hansen. The application was submitted through the Okinawa Defense Bureau (ODB), a local bureau of the Ministry of Defense, the Government of Japan.

Since then, the OPG has periodically checked with the ODB regarding the progress of the on-site survey application. Each time (in February, May, September, and November 2022, February 2023, and March 2024) the ODB has responded, “We have communicated the on-site survey application to the US military on various occasions, and will continue to work closely with the OPG and have thorough discussions with the US military as the government of Japan continues to work on issues such as PFOS.” However, the on-site survey has yet to be approved, and the residents of Kin Town have been experiencing great anxiety about their water supply in the meantime.

In March 2022, the KTO reported that the results of their water quality tests again exceeded the provisional target value (59ng/L) and as a result they had changed to drawing water from a well with a different water source. The OPG, with the cooperation of the Okinawa Prefectural Enterprise Bureau, a local public enterprise of Okinawa Prefecture that operates a water supply business for drinking water and an industrial water supply, provided the KTO with support for temporary water quality testing and confirmed that the value was below the provisional target value.

Since March 2022, the OPG has continued to provide information and advice to the KTO on methods to reduce PFOS and other contaminants, in cooperation with the Enterprise Bureau.

The KTO has requested the Enterprise Bureau to increase the amount of drinking water that it supplies, so that Kin Town can reduce its reliance on the wells that are contaminated by PFOS and other contaminants. Using national subsidies, the KTO has carried out the related construction work, and stopped supplying water from the Kin Water Treatment Plant and Namisato Water Treatment Plant from February 2023, and is now supplying drinking water from the Enterprise Bureau to each household and other places in the town.

On March 27, 2024, the ODB visited the OPG and stated that they confirmed the facts with the US side regarding a media report in September 2019 that foam fire extinguishing agents containing PFOA were stored at Camp Hansen. The ODB explained the information that the US had provided, as described below:

- The foam fire extinguishing agent at Camp Hansen was replaced in September 2021 and has been properly incinerated.
- There is no history of use of the subject agents, and they have been properly maintained and managed.
- There were no recorded incidents of leakage or spillages outside of the subject facility and area.

Issues

Although it is not possible to determine the cause of the contamination due to the complexity of the underground water veins around the water source in Kin Town, high concentrations of PFOS and other chemical substances have been detected in the rivers around Camp Hansen. Therefore, the OPG has submitted an application to the US military through the ODB, requesting permission to enter Camp Hansen to conduct a survey for the cause of the PFOS leak.

Until now, similar applications for entry into Futenma Air Station and Kadena Air Station regarding surveys for PFOS and other chemical substances, the cases of which have a high probability of originating from US military bases, have not received a response, even several years after the application was submitted, so it is highly likely that the applications for entry into Camp Hansen will be handled in the same way.

Future Actions

The OPG, through the ODB, will continue to request the US military to provide access to the base so that it can conduct an on-site survey.

In addition, the OPG will continue to provide advice to the KTO on how to comply with water safety target values and how to further reduce its PFOS contamination levels, in cooperation with the Okinawa Prefectural Enterprise Bureau, in order to ensure a stable supply of safe and secure tap water.

Conclusion

Up to now, the OPG has repeatedly requested the Japanese government to allow it to conduct on-site investigations at the US military bases. However, the Japan-US Status of Forces Agreement and the Environmental Supplementary Agreement, both of which leave discretionary authority to the U.S. military, have been obstacles to this request. As a result, the OPG has not been permitted entry to the base, making it impossible to identify the source of contamination.

“Water and Sanitation” is one of the 17 goals of the UN’s SDGs, and the “Right to Obtain Water” is recognized as a basic human right under international law.

The issue of water for Okinawans is a human rights and cultural issue, and it is our right to thoroughly investigate the causes of PFOS and other chemical substances. However, the situation is such that it is difficult to guarantee the right of the prefecture's residents to water.

We hope that the UN will also urge both the Japanese and US governments to implement measures such as a fundamental review of the Japan-US Status of Forces Agreement, permit the OPG to conduct the on-site inspections of bases, and implement measures against PFOS contamination, in order to resolve the issues of PFOS and other substances in Okinawa Prefecture. We hope that you will support the Okinawa Prefectural Government’s efforts regarding these issues in the future.