

State of Wisconsin
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
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June 15, 2021

CITY OF RHINELANDER
ATTN: CHRISTOPHER FREDERICKSON - MAYOR
135 S STEVENS ST
RHINELANDER WI 54501

ONEIDA COUNTY
ATTN: DAVID HINTZ - BOARD CHAIRPERSON
1144 MEDICINE LAKE LODGE RD
THREE LAKES WI 54562

RHINELANDER/ONEIDA COUNTY AIRPORT
ATTN: MATTHEW LEITNER - DIRECTOR
3375 AIRPORT RD
RHINELANDER WI 54501

SUBJECT: Response to the Letter from the Rhinelander/Oneida County Airport
Rhinelander Municipal Well #7
ACTION REQUIRED BY JULY 30, 2021
DNR BRRTS Activity #02-44-584094

Dear Messrs. Frederickson, Hintz, Leitner:

The purpose of this letter is twofold: 1) To provide a response to our mutual discussions and correspondence from September 2020, and 2) to direct you to proceed with implementing a site investigation as requested in our responsible party letter of December 9, 2019.

As you will recall, on December 9, 2019, the Department of Natural Resources (Department) issued a responsible party letter to the City of Rhinelander, Oneida County and Rhinelander/Oneida County Airport (Airport RPs) outlining the environmental obligations to investigate the degree and extent of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) discharged to the environment due to the operations of the airport. This letter required a site investigation work plan to be submitted to the Department within 60 days of receipt, by February 2020. Although there have been numerous communications between the Department and the Airport RPs on the required work, the Department has not yet received a site investigation work plan.

On September 29, 2020, the Department received correspondence from Airport Director Matthew Leitner in response to a request by the Department during a conference call on September 17, 2020, for further clarification regarding the mandatory Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) testing protocols for aqueous firefighting foam (AFFF).

In the September 29 letter, Mr. Leitner stated, “Only a small amount of AFFF foam is released from the nozzle of a fire truck during this mandatory testing, and the foam has always been containerized and properly disposed of off-site. No AFFF was ever used to fight an aircraft or other fire at the Airport and no AFFF has ever been released to the tarmac, the storm sewer, or larger environment. Even if any of this foam would have reached the tarmac, it would have flowed into a storm sewer which is down gradient of and far removed from the Municipal Well #7 area.” The letter further stated the storm sewer is not connected to the City’s wastewater treatment facility.

The Department has reviewed relevant local newspaper articles and video segments related to firefighting training drills and practices at the Oneida County/Rhineland Airport available to the public, such as articles from the *Northwoods Star Journal*, dated May 2, 2019, and *The Northwoods River News*, dated May 4, 2019, and a still available *YouTube* video, dated August 6, 2014. These articles and video confirm the airport has a history of firefighting training. Based on the Department’s knowledge of historic firefighting training conducted at other airports in Wisconsin, the use of AFFF was commonplace in training drills conducted across the state. The categorical statements that “live fire drills were always conducted with just water” and that “the foam [from mandatory testing] has always been containerized and properly disposed of off-site” are not consistent with what has been reported to the Department from other airports in Wisconsin. A site investigation is necessary to define the degree and extent of PFAS contamination caused by operations at the airport.

Based on information compiled by the Department’s Drinking Water and Groundwater Program, there are more than twenty private drinking water wells located between the airport and the Wisconsin River. Considering the geologic and hydrogeologic conditions in the area, there is a high likelihood that these private wells are completed in the same sand and gravel aquifer as the impacted municipal wells, and potentially are at a similar risk of impact. The Department believes it is imperative that you conduct a survey of private wells downgradient from the airport, and sample those wells deemed to be at risk for PFAS contamination. The sampling results will inform whether you need to implement an interim action under Wis. Admin. Code s. NR 708.11. Please submit to the Department by **July 30, 2021** the results of the private well survey and a plan for sampling wells deemed to be at risk.

In addition, please submit a site investigation work plan to the Department by **August 14, 2021**. The Department is allowing additional time for the Airport RPs to submit the site investigation work plan so that effort can be concentrated immediately on sampling private wells. In addition, please supply the Department with documentation listing the AFFF testing dates, materials used, waste disposal records and as-built plans of the airport’s stormwater and wastewater infrastructure. Please provide the most recent stormwater pollution prevention plan for the airport.

As a more general comment related to the teleconference held with Airport RPs and the Department on September 17, 2020, it is the Department’s understanding that the Airport RPs retained the environmental consulting firm of Mead & Hunt to assist in your response to the responsible party letter issued by the Department on December 9, 2019. The staff from Mead & Hunt were present during the September 17 teleconference. General references were made during the September 17 teleconference and again in Mr. Leitner’s September 29 clarification letter to groundwater flow gradients, presumably to assert that AFFF use at the airport could not be associated with detections of PFAS compounds in Municipal Well #7 based on distance and/or groundwater flow direction.

The Department has not yet received any correspondence or reports from Mead & Hunt related to investigation or evaluation of PFAS associated with the airport, or to geologic or hydrogeologic conditions around the airport as required and outlined in the December 2019 responsible party letter. If such investigations or evaluations have been completed, share the relevant information with the Department as soon as possible so that we can include that in our assessment.

Please address your noncompliance as soon as possible by providing the private well survey and plan for sampling wells deemed to be at risk by July 30, 2021, and the site investigation work plan by August 14, 2021. If you require additional time to gather the materials, a written extension by the Department is necessary. Failure to meet this timeline will result in the Department considering implementation of our enforcement process.

If you have any questions regarding this letter, please do not hesitate to contact the DNR Project Manager for this site, Carrie Stoltz at Carrie.Stoltz@Wisconsin.gov or call her directly at (715) 360-1966.

Sincerely,



Christopher A. Saari
Northern Region Team Supervisor
Remediation & Redevelopment Program

cc: Darsi Foss – AD/8
Christine Haag – RR/5
Trevor Nobile – SER Milwaukee
Carrie Stoltz – NOR Rhinelander
Laura Morland – Mead & Hunt
Richard Lewandowski – Husch Blackwell
Michael Fugel – Oneida County
Steven Sorenson – von Briesen & Roper