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DON'T LET TURNOUTS TURN INTO CANCER FOR YOU AND/OR YOUR FAMILY

By Scott A. O'Mara

The subject of polyfluoroalkyl substances — also known as PFAS — was reviewed and discussed by the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) and the Metro Chiefs, and a joint statement was issued on August 23, 2022 under the heading “IAFF AND METRO CHIEFS ADVISE MEMBERS OF ADVERSE HEALTH RISKS LINKED TO FIRE FIGHTER TURNOUT GEAR”. According to that statement:

“Recent studies have shown all three layers of the protective clothing contain Per and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) chemicals, which have been linked to cancer — the leading cause of fire fighter deaths.”

As a result of these studies:

“The IAFF and Metro Chiefs are encouraging members to reduce their exposure to PFAS by limiting use of turnout gear only to emergency responses where its protection is a necessity. Wearing all PPE and self-contained breathing apparatuses during firefighting, overhaul, and working in smoke remains the best first line of defense to protect from fireground contaminants until PFAS-free alternatives are available.”

Jamie DeWitt, a toxicology professor at East Carolina University, has commented on the subject of PFAS exposure:

“We actually know very little about how PFAS penetrates through the skin . . .”

“Firefighters may be at particular risk of exposure to PFAS from clothing because they wear their gear for long periods of time, often while they're sweating and exposed to high heat.”

“When you're sweating, your pores open up, your capillaries dilate. So it's easier to absorb things that might be in materials that are on your skin.”

These comments clearly reflect the substantial health risk created by PFAS exposure contained in the clothing turnouts that firefighters wear while doing their job — sometimes for long periods of time.

Several articles address the exposure firefighters have to PFAS while wearing their turnouts, and the increased risk of developing cancer as a result of such exposure. The next step is to recognize that the failure of protection from PFAS exposure carries over to the families of firefighters.

In Law1199.com Newsletter 2022 Issue #5, I addressed the protection needed by those who have lead exposure and the protection needed for their families. That protection is needed *now, not later*, and the same is true for those who have PFAS exposure. Again, *we're talking not only about those who have direct PFAS exposure, but their families as well.*

Firefighters should be provided time at work to undergo a complete cleansing from head to toe to remove any residue of harmful exposures they have throughout their career. The goal is to remove any cancer-causing particulates so the firefighters themselves are free of these dangerous substances and are not cancer carriers to their families at home.

A protocol needs to be established so firefighters can have their clothing properly cleaned after each PFAS exposure so it is ready for use again the next time it is needed. This cleansing will protect the firefighters themselves, their families, and anyone else with whom they come into contact.

It does not take much observation to recognize that if, after a shift, a firefighter is not given the time needed for proper cleansing of the gear which has been worn — as well as time to clean themselves — they may go home carrying harmful substances which may be spread to family members. In addition, those contaminants may spread to any place the firefighter goes, such as when traveling in their car. It does not take much evaluation to realize that driving in the car day after day — after wearing the firefighting gear each day — will only increase the level of pollution and its potential impact on both the firefighters and their families.

Again, protection is needed not only for firefighters, but for their families and friends as well. The cleaning must be thorough and complete --- including the uniforms, the turnouts and the breathing apparatus — before the next shift comes on. **THIS IS A NECESSITY.** The health risks posed by uniforms, turnouts and breathing apparatus flows over to health risks for the families involved.

At this time, a protocol must be established to protect workers (and their families) following the end of each shift. Ample time must be allowed so workers can clean themselves thoroughly and not carry any contaminants home to their families or the public.

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NOTICE: Making a false or fraudulent Workers' Compensation claim is a felony subject to up to 5 years in prison or a fine of up to \$50,000 or double the value of the fraud, whichever is greater, or by both imprisonment and fine
