

Testimony of Sandy Wynn-Stelt

Before the

Environment Subcommittee

Of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform On

The Devil They Knew - PFAS Contamination and the Need for Corporate Accountability

July 24, 2019

Thank you so much for the opportunity to share the story of my community. The effects of PFAS contamination in my life, and the life of my neighbors has been devastating. I am hopeful that there can be some progress made on this issue in the coming months and am grateful that the subcommittee is attending to this issue.

I am afraid my story is like many in our country that have been affected by industrial contamination of our water. My husband and I moved into our home in 1992, in what we thought was the perfect location. It was a quiet and rural neighborhood, which was just what we wanted. My husband worked as a Protective Services worker and I worked in mental health. We loved the idea of a home that was our sanctuary, peaceful, full of nature and away from others. In March of 2016, my husband went for what we thought would be a routine surgery, and we planned to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary shortly after this. But instead he was diagnosed with stage 4 liver cancer. He died just three weeks later. Losing my husband Joel is hard to measure in dollars. We completed each other. We were a couple that both complimented and challenged the other person to be better and do better. We did not have a day that we didn't laugh together, not a giggle but laughing until it hurt. We could read each other's minds and could finish each other's sentences. We would drive everywhere on vacations simply because we loved to be together to talk. He retired from the state, and then came to my business every day to 'work', which really was an excuse for us to spend time together. The house is so quiet without him.

A year later, in 2017, I was approached by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality asking to test my well water for a contaminant called PFAS. I had never heard of this, but now am too familiar with this class of chemicals. I soon learned that my well water has been contaminated with PFAS and related compounds. My drinking water has tested at levels of 27,000; and then 38,000 ppt. Most recently my well has tested at 86,000 ppt for PFOA and PFOS, significantly higher than the lifetime health advisory of 70 ppt set by the EPA.

I came to learn that the Christmas tree farm directly across from our home, was actually a dump site for Wolverine World Wide. In the 1960's and 1970's Wolverine would dig giant troughs where they would bring truckloads of tannery waste, full of among other things, Scotch guard. These troughs flowed into the ground water and have contaminated roughly 25 square miles of my community, most of whom are on private wells for water sources. To make matters worse, I have learned that in 2000 3M, the manufacturer of Scotch Guard, and Wolverine had conversations about the risk to health, and the disposal of this contaminant. While Wolverine had stopped disposing at that property earlier, no one bothered to tell myself or my husband. We continued to drink contaminated water for the next 16 years, until his death at 61.

Without him here, it is truly like a part of me is missing. I don't have someone to hold my hand and reassure me that everything will be fine. I don't have someone to lay in bed and listen to me be scared about the future. I don't have someone to eat dinner with and talk about our day, or politics, or baseball. I don't have someone to

be with me when my parents die, when my nephews graduate, and when I accomplish something-anything. I don't have someone to grow old with, travel the world with, or laugh with. I've lost my travel buddy. Our friends are wonderful, but I'm now the 'third wheel'. I avoid going with them so that we don't feel uncomfortable looking at the empty chair that Joel would be in. They avoid inviting me so that I won't be reminded of fun things we did before. Life becomes very lonely when your husband is gone.

The hardest thing for people to understand is that when you become a widow, your life literally stops. But gradually, over time, you do heal. I started to feel some joy, look forward to some things, find new activities and interests. I started to connect with things. In 2017 I signed up to volunteer for the American Red Cross and was supposed to do Hurricane Relief. I had decided that I could put my passion for mental health to good use and there was a desperate need for mental health professionals throughout the summer. Literally the week I was to be deployed all of the contamination issue became consuming. I had to turn down the deployment to Houston, to Florida and to Puerto Rico. I couldn't leave because this became such a nightmare.

And now, because the entire situation is at a standstill, I am forced to simply continue to grieve without closure. Every time I meet with the media, meet with lawyers, answer emails and texts about this, talk to consultants, or answer questions from strangers I'm brought back to the fact that my husband died suddenly and painfully due to water contamination potentially for decades that progressively damaged his liver. It's like a bad dream that you can't wake from, and you are forced to stay grieving day after day after day.

In late 2017 I had my blood tested. My blood levels have tested at 5,000,000 ppt. My understanding is that these are some of the highest levels that have been found. No one can tell me what this will do to me, though it is in all probability what will end my life. Now that I know that I have some of the highest recorded levels of PFAS in my blood, the anxiety is overwhelming. I have no idea what this may cause in the future. I lay awake contemplating the potential reality that one day I will have to drive to chemotherapy alone, without my husband to be there for support. But this is not just my problem.

In the past ten years, my neighborhood has grown. At last count, we have more than 22 kids within a quarter mile of the recently found dump site, many of them under the age of six. I cannot imagine the anxiety that their parents feel. We all have water systems in our homes and have to carry 48-pound jugs of water into the home and load them into a water dispenser. In the winter, my neighbors and I have to store these several of these water jugs in the house, or they will freeze. We have become a neighborhood that does not borrow a cup of sugar, but instead will call to borrow a jug of water if we are caught short. Children in the neighborhood cannot play in the sprinkler, fill their pools, or drink from the hose outside. We cannot garden and harvest food. A three-year-old in our neighborhood had blood levels of PFAS at 484,000 ppt. His immune system is abnormal, in all likelihood because of this contamination.

Contamination from PFAS and related compounds that had been disposed nearby have devastated my neighborhood and community. This is a 'forever' chemical that cannot be seen, smelled, or tasted. There was no way for any of us to know. It will not evaporate, dissolve, burn or dissipate. It is a secret contaminant and is much more prevalent than was initially believed. This can no longer be ignored. My neighbors and community are asking that Congress help us with the following.

1. We need to require industrial users and manufacturers of PFAS to report how much PFAS they emit into the air and water, how much of these chemicals are disposed of and their location. Michigan has taken a lead in this effort and have been concerned about the scope of what has been found. And most in the state believe there is more that has not been discovered. There needs to be continued effort to discover the scope of this problem and ensure that communities are provided with that information.

2. Manufacturers and polluters responsible for the PFAS contamination across the country should pay their fair share for the clean-up efforts. Taxpayers should not be responsible to fund the cleanup of corporations who have profited for years while knowing that this class of chemicals posed a health risk to the community at large. To that end, it is critical that PFAS are designated as "hazardous substances" under CERCLA, the Superfund law, so that we can begin to cleanup legacy PFAS contamination and so that EPA can hold polluters accountable for paying for cleanup costs.
3. PFAS discharges should be subject to the federal Clean Water Act. Polluters should not be able to dump as much PFAS waste as they want in our rivers, streams, and sources of drinking water. They also should not be able to send their PFAS wastes to public wastewater utilities without treating their pollution first.
4. We need to do much more to monitor for PFAS in drinking water sources and tap water.
5. We need to fund further research into the health effects of these chemicals. Standards need to be established based on scientific research that is relevant to medical findings after research has occurred, not based on the minimal amount of research that has been published.
6. And we need to be proactive in the future, not allowing chemicals to be disposed of without researching the health effects that can occur and ensuring that they are disposed of in whatever way minimizes risks to public health.

My dream home is no longer worth anything, and in fact is probably a liability. The investment in property is gone. I have lost my husband. I will eventually probably succumb to something related to this contamination. But despite this I am hopeful that Congress can use my story, and the story of my neighbors to prevent this from happening to others.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Sandy Wynn-Stelt