

FAQs relating to the temporary closure of Onehunga Water Treatment Plant

19 October 2022

Why are you shutting down the Onehunga Water Treatment Plant?

Water services regulator Taumata Arowai has developed new New Zealand Drinking Water Standards that will come into effect on November 14. For the first time, the standards will include a maximum acceptable value (MAV) for per- and poly-fluorinated alkyl substances (PFAS), which are manufactured chemicals used in things like nonstick cookware and water-resistant clothing.

We've been testing for the presence of PFAS in our raw and treated water at Onehunga for the past four years. These results show levels of PFAS above the soon-to-be-introduced maximum acceptable value on four occasions.

We take pride in meeting the NZ Drinking Water Standards 100% of the time, so to ensure we can continue to do so, we are temporarily shutting down the Onehunga Water Treatment Plant.

What is PFAS?

PFAS stands for per- and poly-fluorinated alkyl substances, a set of manufactured chemicals used in things like nonstick cookware and water-resistant clothing, and historically used in firefighting foam. PFOS is banned completely in New Zealand, and another PFAS chemical, PFOA, is no longer approved for use in firefighting foams.

Where did the PFAS come from?

We don't know. Auckland Council, in its regulatory role, is looking to identify the possible source of the contamination, however this will be challenging as the contamination is likely to be historical. It will carry out groundwater testing, which may help in establishing whether the source is ongoing from surface contamination or not.

If you've found PFAS in the water multiple times already, why wasn't the plant shut down earlier?

Currently, we are not required to test for PFAS under the drinking water standards. In June, Taumata Arowai announced the new standards with the limit which come into effect on November 14. Since then, we have been investigating our options and have decided to temporarily shut down the treatment plant to ensure we can maintain compliance with the new standards.

Should I be worried about the PFAS levels in my water supply?

A person would have to be drinking water with levels of PFAS consistently above the threshold in the new drinking water standards over a long period of time for there to be cause for concern. This is certainly not the case in Onehunga. Most of our sampling has found PFAS levels to be well below the new limit.

When do you plan to turn the plant back on?

We're considering the best long-term options for the treatment plant. This may include additional treatment processes to remove any PFAS from the water. At this point, we don't know when we will be in the position to reinstate the plant, but it is likely to be more than a year.

Didn't you upgrade the treatment plant last year?

We upgraded the treatment plant to increase its capacity. Our focus wasn't on upgrading the treatment processes.

How do you know you can meet Onehunga's water supply needs over summer without the plant?

We have undertaken thorough trials to 'stress test' network performance. This included simulating high summer demand and a large fire. We found the system was able to cope without any impact on customers.

Why didn't my water supply have fluoride in it before now?

Until now, the area's drinking water has not had fluoride added. This was in keeping with a decision made many years ago by the former Onehunga Borough Council. However, in July Dr Ashley Bloomfield, in his role as Director-General of Health, [directed us to fluoridate the area's water supply by June 2024](#). Temporarily shutting down the Onehunga Water Treatment Plant means our customers in this area will have fluoride in their water from now on (two years earlier than required).

[Please click here for the fluoride fact sheet.](#)