
Jose Villegas, a National Guard chaplain, was one of the first in La Cieneguilla to find out his well water was contaminated with PFAS. Credit: Nadav Soroker/Searchlight New Mexico

# When PFAS hits home: Poisoned wells in La Cieneguilla

Unable to drink their water, residents want action — and answers from the New Mexico National Guard.

by **Ed Williams**
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During the decades that he's lived in his home southwest of Santa Fe, Jose Villegas was oblivious to the toxic chemicals that were seeping through the aquifer, slowly spreading under his house in the historic village of La Cieneguilla and into the well that supplied his family with drinking water.

His neighbors were also drinking the well water, unaware that the New Mexico National Guard had discovered **more than a year earlier** that the groundwater and soil on its site by the Santa Fe airport were contaminated with PFAS, a class of chemicals linked to cancer and other illnesses — and present in everything from household products to firefighting foams at military sites.

That changed in August 2023, when a groundwater specialist with Santa Fe County knocked on Villegas's door and asked if he would allow his water to be tested. The results came back at 14 parts per trillion (ppt), nearly four times higher than a proposed federal safety standard to protect human health. Blood tests would later confirm that the chemicals were in his body at high levels.

"I thought this water was pure and clean," Villegas said, adding that his family had potentially been drinking contaminated water for years. "Now I got this PFAS, this firefighting foam, in my *sangre,* in my blood. I have a right to be upset, right? I'm 65, I'm supposed to be going on my golden years. And then I have to deal with this shit?

"They need to declare an emergency over here, because nobody can use their wells," he said.

As a chaplain in the National Guard, Villegas is quite familiar with the facility that he and others in the community feel is primarily responsible for the water contamination: the National Guard's Army Aviation Support Facility on the Santa Fe airport property some 2.5 miles to the north, where firefighting foams were stored and potentially used for training until the early 2000s, according to the National Guard.


Jose Villegas, an official with the Texas Band of Yaqui Indians, stands by his garden in La Cieneguilla, where he used to grow vegetables and share them with his neighbors. He can no longer grow food there because of PFAS contamination in his well water. Credit: Nadav Soroker/Searchlight New Mexico

Villegas knew the foams were on-site — but nobody had told him that the chemicals had spread into the groundwater, or that those chemicals could put his family's drinking water at risk and contaminate his neighbors' water as well.

"They know me," Villegas said of the National Guard. "I thought they would have the courtesy to tell me that our water might have a problem. I've heard nada from them — they haven't so much as offered me a glass of clean water to drink."

News of the water contamination has rocked La Cieneguilla, a small village sandwiched between the Santa Fe Airport and the neighborhood of La Cienega.

But it is only the most recent community to find itself at **the frontlines** of a national crisis: Across the country, thousands of private wells near **military sites**, **factories** and **airports** have become contaminated with PFAS

at levels higher than what federal regulators and medical experts consider safe for drinking.

While there have been major efforts to address the problem, any real action to clean up PFAS contamination can take years, or even decades.

The situation can be particularly dire for private well owners, who are largely responsible for their own water quality. In New Mexico alone, an estimated **270,000 people** rely on water from a private well. They have little recourse if PFAS or other contaminants are discovered in their water. Lawsuits can be filed and the responsible party might eventually agree to a cleanup. But action is rarely swift.


A **Santa Fe County map** of the wells it tested for PFAS, one of many documents that Villegas has been collecting. Credit: Nadav Soroker/Searchlight New Mexico

“Something that tends to get lost is just how long these processes take and how many people continue to be exposed in the meantime,” said Jared Hayes, senior policy analyst at the Environmental Working Group, a

nonprofit that tracks PFAS issues. “There are still going to be people drinking contaminated water for years to come.”

## Another blow for a historic community

For La Cieneguilla, the contamination is like salt on old wounds. “The fact is, this is an old traditional community, right next to tribal land, and many of the residents have historic roots,” said Camilla Bustamante, the Santa Fe County Commissioner for the district. “There has been a lot of encroachment and lack of consideration on the development and impacts to that village. It’s an issue of environmental justice.”

The construction of the airport and National Guard facility on La Cieneguilla’s northern flank, as well as the installation of the Santa Fe wastewater treatment plant and other upstream projects, have all been completed without input from the community, she said, even though each has the potential to impact residents’ health.

The discovery of the PFAS contamination — and a perceived lack of communication by the National Guard and other authorities — has added to the gut punch, residents say.

Vioma Trujillo, at her home in La Cieneguilla, offers a prayer to a deceased friend who was an environmentalist. Trujillo, also an advocate for the environment and water rights, believes the PFAS problem is one more sign of government neglect. Credit: Nadav Soroker/Searchlight New Mexico

"It's an environmental catastrophe," said Vioma Trujillo, who has lived in La Cieneguilla since 1979. She's hoping the county will test her well for PFAS, saving her the hundreds of dollars it would cost out of pocket. In the meantime, she's drinking bottled water. "The government has never respected this land grant," she said, referring to the land rights granted by Spain and Mexico and **acknowledged by the U.S. government** in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

"We have our water rights. We respect the water, and now this. It's so painful."

## Levels eight times too high

After testing Villegas's water, Santa Fe County tested an additional five private wells in the vicinity; in addition, several neighbors forked up the money for private testing. In all, concerning levels of PFAS appeared in at least 10 wells. In one instance, tests revealed the chemicals at 32 ppt — eight times the EPA's

recommended drinking water limit of 4 ppt. (PFAS chemicals have also been detected at two wells in the nearby La Cienega neighborhood, but at much lower levels.)

Pablo C de Vaca points to the new well his daughter built at her home in La Cieneguilla. PFAS was discovered in the water shortly afterward. Credit: Nadav Soroker/Searchlight New Mexico

“There are kids who are drinking this water, and elderly people,” said Pablo C de Vaca. His daughter, he said, recently bought a house in La Cieneguilla and paid $20,000 to install a new well, only to hear the news that the water was contaminated. “She doesn’t think she could sell the house now if she wanted to,” he said.

“There’s been no communication” about the contamination from authorities — “we don’t know what’s going on,” C de Vaca added.

C de Vaca’s daughter hired a company to install a well-water filter system, which costs upwards of $2,000. Other neighbors have done the same, sometimes using their social security checks to cover the costs. Many residents are drinking bottled water, another expense. Some, like Jose Villegas and his wife, have stopped

using their taps entirely, fearful of even bathing in the contaminated water. Villegas called one military remediation contractor to ask what it would cost to completely clean up his property. The answer: $700,000.

## 'Forever chemicals' everywhere

Since their invention in the late 1930's, PFAS has become ubiquitous in the environment. Often called "forever chemicals" because they don't break down in water, soil, animals or the human body, PFAS (per- and polyfluorinated alkyl substances) are present in myriad products, from nonstick cookware and stain-resistant carpeting to furniture, food packaging, outdoor gear, and **dental floss**. Most notably, the chemicals have been used at military installations in the form of Aqueous Film Forming Foams, or AFFFs, a highly effective firefighting product.

The foams were used for decades to extinguish jet fuel fires or for training exercises and were stored at military bases throughout the country — including at the National Guard facility near La Cieneguilla.

PFAS-laden foams have also seeped into the groundwater at more than **700 other military sites** around the country, according to the Environmental Working Group. That includes Cannon Air Force Base in Clovis, where dairy farmer Art Schaap had to **euthanize his entire herd** of more than 3,000 cows because they drank the water. Farmers in the area have been forced to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on water filtration systems. Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque has also detected the chemicals, as has Holloman Air Force Base near Alamogordo, where a nearby lake was found to have PFAS measuring more than **84,000 times higher** than health advisory levels.

Art Schaap looking over some of his Holstein cows at the Highland Dairy in Clovis. “This has poisoned everything I’ve worked for and everything I care about,” he said. Credit: Don J. Usner/Searchlight New Mexico

As early as **the 1960s**, studies showed that the substances could potentially be harmful to humans. Over the last 40 years, a mountain of research has revealed that PFAS is linked to numerous environmental and human health problems, including **increased risks** of cancers, liver damage, thyroid problems, kidney disease, reproductive harm and other issues.

Nevertheless, it took the EPA until 2023 to announce the first proposed legally enforceable federal standard for certain PFAS chemicals in drinking water, setting the limit — which has not yet been finalized — at 4 ppt. Crucially, the new rule would force industries to meet the limit or risk enforcement action. The EPA’s previous health guideline for drinking water set a suggested limit of 70 ppt, a level that has long been considered far too high.

## A winning petition from New Mexico

There has been additional progress in the battle against PFAS exposure, especially at the state level. In December 2018, New Mexico added three types of PFAS to its list of toxic pollutants, a move that allows state regulators to require cleanups from polluters who contaminate the groundwater.

Another key regulatory move was a step the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency took this month to classify certain types of PFAS as hazardous waste — an action taken in response to a **petition** Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham sent to the agency in 2021. This regulation will help states prevent and compel cleanups of future PFAS pollution.

But as it stands today, the process of initiating a cleanup can be excruciatingly slow. That's due in no small part to the ubiquity of PFAS in the environment: The first step in any cleanup is to identify the responsible party, but when it comes to PFAS there can be many contributors.


An entrance to the Army Aviation Support Facility in Santa Fe, where PFAS was discovered. Credit: Nadav Soroker/Searchlight New Mexico

The National Guard highlighted this in its 2023 study of PFAS found on its facility near La Cieneguilla. The report showed that groundwater under the site was flowing toward homes in La Cieneguilla and La Cienega. But the National Guard claimed that the Santa Fe Airport and neighboring municipal wastewater treatment plant potentially contributed to the contamination.

The National Guard said it plans to undertake a "remedial investigation" to define the nature and extent of the contamination and evaluate risks to human health and the environment. That process can take "several years to complete," New Mexico National Guard spokesman Hank Minitrez **stated in an email**.

In the past, in cases that didn't involve PFAS, the New Mexico Environment Department has used its legal authority to go after groundwater polluters without waiting for them to complete their own study. But in this case, the agency is holding off until the National Guard provides more information.

"At the appropriate time, we will take the appropriate action," said John Rhoderick, director of NMED's Water Protection Division. Rhoderick said the state is hoping the responsible parties will clean up the contamination voluntarily — otherwise, the process could get tied up in court, which could drag things out even further.

"I know people don't want to spend the money to pay for a filter on their home and the ongoing costs for something they didn't do," Rhoderick said. "But the reality is this: Even if we had a clear-cut responsible party and we began to move forward on everything, it would be a significant period of time before anything began to happen on those private wells, *if* anything."

The pace has infuriated residents of La Cieneguilla.

There might not be a legal obligation to inform neighbors under current law, Jared Hayes of the Environmental Working Group said of the situation. But there is "an ethical one."

"They really ought to be getting help for those surrounding communities," he said.

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