

Focus on: Alternatives assessment on PFAS chemicals in food packaging



WHAT ARE PFAS?

Per- and polyfluorinated alkyl substances (PFAS) are applied to food packaging to help prevent the penetration of water, oil, and grease. For example, PFAS-based food packaging may be used in sandwich wraps, popcorn bags, take-out boxes, and pizza boxes.

PFAS has been shown to get into the environment from:

- Using PFAS firefighting foam.
- Washing clothes and cookware with PFAS coatings.
- Disposing of products that contain PFAS like food packaging.

These chemicals have been found in drinking water, groundwater, wastewater, compost, and biosolids.

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Ecology's report to the Legislature

In 2018, the Washington State Legislature passed a law prohibiting the use of all per- and polyfluorinated alkyl substances (PFAS) in plant fiber-based food packaging. Before the ban takes effect, Ecology must identify whether safer alternatives to PFAS are available and publish the findings in a report to the Legislature.

In order to determine whether safer alternatives to PFAS are available, Ecology is conducting an "alternatives assessment." This is a formal process to identify, compare, and select safer alternatives to chemicals of concern and evaluate a chemical's hazards, performance, and economic viability.

Progress on the report

Ecology has made significant progress in understanding the very broad range of food contact products that may contain PFAS. The agency is working with a contractor to develop the hazard, exposure, cost, and performance data necessary to complete the alternatives assessment.

Ecology originally planned to focus its analysis on food wrappers and liners, which are the most common application of PFAS in food packaging. Since then, businesses and industry groups have asked Ecology to collect more information from end users (like restaurants and retailers) about the availability, cost, and performance of PFAS-free food packaging products. In addition, environmental groups asked Ecology to consider additional related food packaging products. After considering all the input from interested parties, Ecology decided to broaden the scope of its assessment to include additional food packaging types like plates, bowls, trays, and related items and will do additional outreach to end users.

FOOD PACKAGING ALTERNATIVES ASSESSMENT PROGRESS

Since the adoption of RCW 70.95G, Ecology has:

- Selected a project contractor.
- Engaged with interested parties representing manufacturers, trade organizations, purchasers, environmental advocates, and others to build a stakeholder list of over 300 participants.
- Identified the most common types of PFAS used in food packaging.
- Selected a representative PFAS treatment chemical for assessment work.
- Selected sandwich wraps and food product liners as representative products.
- Engaged in several rounds of input and feedback from stakeholders regarding the current project scope.
- Responded to stakeholder input on scope by expanding project scope to include additional products for serving food, such as plates, bowls, and food trays.
- Developed proposals for hazard and exposure assessment portions of the alternatives assessment.
- Developed a process for manufacturers to share proprietary data that balances project transparency while protecting confidential business information.

Leveraging the research on PFAS in food wrappers and liners, as well as getting additional user information, will result in a more comprehensive assessment in a single report.

Developing agreements with manufacturers that encourage them to confidentially share formulas and trade secrets is an indispensable part of collecting performance data. Current law does not give Ecology the power to require such disclosures—manufacturers must be willing to share information voluntarily. With support from the Attorney General's Office, Ecology now has agreements in place to encourage sharing of this confidential data.

Timeline

The assessment's anticipated completion date has been delayed due to expanding the scope of Ecology's review, collecting more robust user data, and negotiating with manufacturers to ensure the agency receives the best information available. After completing the required analysis, Ecology expects to:

- Complete a draft report available for peer review in early fall 2020.
- Publish the findings and feedback from the peer review in the Washington State Register in late fall 2020.
- Submit a final report to the Legislature by December 2020.

If safer alternatives are identified, this would permit a ban on PFAS-based packaging to come into effect two years later, in late 2022.

More information

Learn about Ecology's work to assess the safety of PFAS and reduce exposure to these chemicals at ecology.wa.gov/PFAS.

Special accommodations

To request ADA accommodation including materials in a format for the visually impaired, call Ecology at 360-407-6831 or visit <https://ecology.wa.gov/accessibility>. People with impaired hearing may call Washington Relay Service at 711. People with speech disability may call TTY at 877-833-6341.