

San Francisco set to ban 'forever chemicals' in firefighter gear

May 14 2024, by Robin Foster



San Francisco is on the verge of passing a ban on "forever chemicals" in

the protective clothing firefighters wear while battling blazes.

City lawmakers are expected to pass an [ordinance](#) on Tuesday that will prohibit the use of firefighting gear made with per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS).

PFAS have been linked to [health harms](#), including decreased fertility, low-birth weight and developmental delays in children, a greater risk of certain cancers and higher cholesterol levels, according to the [Environmental Protection Agency](#).

While the compounds, which linger for years in the environment, have been phased out of most manufacturing, they are still used in some firefighting foams and nearly all firefighters' uniforms because they resist flames and [extreme heat](#), NBC News reported.

If passed into law, the city's fire department would have until June 30, 2026, to buy new [protective clothing](#) made without PFAS for its more than 1,400 firefighters.

San Francisco Board of Supervisors President Aaron Peskin, who authored the legislation, said he believes the ban "is morally right and it is financially right."

"Cost is so small compared to a human life, is so small compared to the cost of health care, is so small compared to the cost of settling lawsuits," he told NBC News.

Lt. Magaly Saade, a [firefighter](#) and training instructor at the San Francisco Fire Department, has had cancer twice, forcing her to undergo radiation and a double mastectomy.

She believes wearing protective pants and jacket during her 26 years as a

firefighter may have contributed to her illnesses.

"I definitely don't want someone else to have to go through what I did," Saade told NBC News.

Firefighters are also exposed to other cancer-causing substances during their work that include smoke, asbestos, diesel exhaust and other hazards; the World Health Organization even [classifies firefighting as carcinogenic](#).

Still, protective gear made without PFAS is not yet widely available, NBC News reported.

Since February, 11 San Francisco firefighters have been testing new uniforms made without PFAS—part of a nationwide trial orchestrated by the International Association of Fire Fighters.

The trial is studying the reliability of uniforms from three different companies. Preliminary findings are expected this summer, NBC News reported.

Adam Wood, vice president of the San Francisco Firefighters Cancer Prevention Foundation, is one of the firefighters testing the new gear.

"In terms of working in a fire, allowing us to do our job, protecting us from heat—I have nothing but good things to report," he told NBC News.

Still, experts say questions remain about the long-term safety of PFAS-free alternatives for firefighters.

"We don't want to just trade one hazard for another," Bryan Ormond, an assistant professor of textile engineering at North Carolina State

University, told NBC News. "We have to ask the questions of what the tradeoffs are, what can possibly happen."

Ormond said his work has so far shown that removing PFAS may make firefighter uniforms less breathable and more susceptible to burning. He found that alternative fabrics can be up to 60% less repellent than traditional uniforms, also known as turnouts.

"We're introducing a potential hazard for flammability on the fire scene where firefighters didn't have that before," he said.

Wood agreed that more testing is necessary.

"We just need to make sure they still function well as turnouts, protecting us from heat and allowing us to do our job in a burning building," he said. "We need to know the PFAS replacement isn't exchanging one poison for another."

More information: The EPA has more on [PFAS](#).

© 2024 [HealthDay](#). All rights reserved.

Citation: San Francisco set to ban 'forever chemicals' in firefighter gear (2024, May 14) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-05-san-francisco-chemicals-firefighter-gear.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.