HOW TO TACKLE THE PFAS POLLUTION ISSUE

EEB European Environmental Bureau

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What is the problem with PFAS?

What are PFAS?

Per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) are **a group of chemicals** with over **14,000 members known so far.**

PFAS are human-made chemicals that have 'special' chemical properties that make them **resistant** to high temperatures and are powerful water, dirt and grease repellents. This is why they have been widely used since the 1940s in **industrial applications** and **consumer products**, from non-stick coating in pans, to cosmetics, textiles, fire extinguishing foams, pesticides, refrigerants or lubricants.

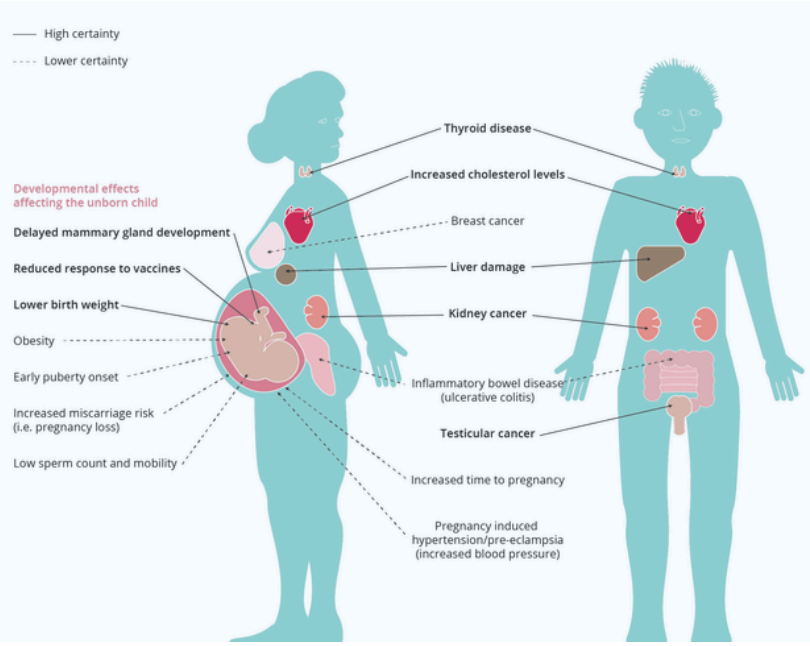
But these special properties come at a cost: **PFAS are not degradable**. This means that once released into the environment, PFAS cannot be broken down by bacteria, enzymes, or sunlight, earning them the name **"forever chemicals"**.

PFAS are everywhere

PFAS are today omnipresent in the environment and in our bodies.
A cross-border investigation called the Forever Pollution Project counted 23,000 sites contaminated by PFAS all over Europe; and an additional 21,500 presumptive contamination sites due to current or past industrial activity. An updated version of the map is available on the PFAS Data Hub website.

PFAS' health impacts

PFAS are linked to a number of serious health problems, including cancer, infertility, birth defects and immune system disorders.



Source: EEA (2019), Emerging chemical risks in Europe - 'PFAS'

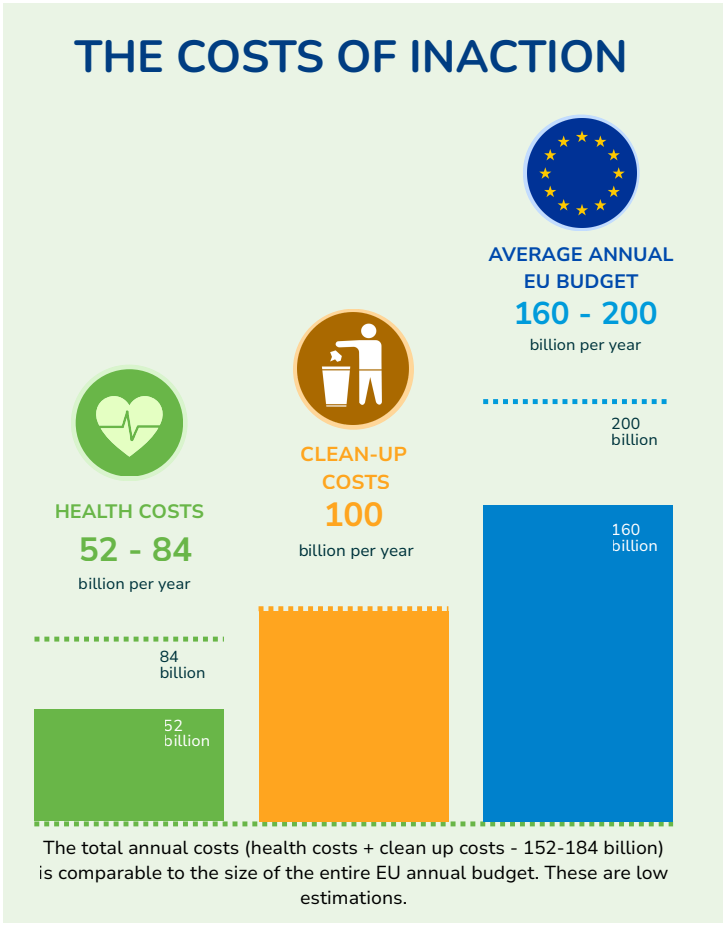
Living with PFAS pollution

Across Europe, communities are already living with the disturbing consequences of PFAS contamination. In the most heavily polluted areas, authorities urge residents not to drink tap water, eat homegrown vegetables or eggs from backyard hens, or allow children to play outdoors during dry weather to reduce exposure. The situation has been described as 'dystopian' and scientists already describe PFAS contamination as the "worst pollution crisis we have ever faced".

The costs

These communities are also bearing PFAS pollution's enormous socioeconomic costs. A 2019 study estimated that the annual health costs associated with PFAS exposure in Europe range from €52 billion to €84 billion. These figures do not account for many wider societal costs, such as lost productivity, job losses, reduced quality of life, or the psychological toll.

The financial burden extends far beyond healthcare. A recent study from the Forever Lobbying Project estimated that cleaning up PFAS across the EU would cost more than €100 billion every year. Another study concluded that the scale of contamination is so vast that there is simply not enough money on Earth to fully remediate it.





The limits of remediation

In July 2026, scientists concluded that remediating PFAS pollution at scale is physically impossible. Even under an extremely ambitious scenario – with €200 billion per year invested in large-scale deployment of emerging technologies – less than 2% of ongoing PFAS emissions could be removed from the environment. This estimate does not include TFA precursors or fluoropolymers.

PFAS pollution is not a problem that can simply be cleaned up later. The scale, persistence and costs of contamination make one conclusion unavoidable: **the only effective response is to stop PFAS pollution at its source.**

What is the EU response to PFAS pollution?

The Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability

The European Commission acknowledged the need for a comprehensive approach to PFAS in its 2020 Staff Working Document, published as part of the Chemicals Strategy for Sustainability (CSS). The document set out a broad legislative roadmap to tackle PFAS across their lifecycle.
Six years later, however, progress has fallen short of that ambition.

The universal PFAS restriction

The flagship initiative under the CSS is the proposed universal PFAS restriction under REACH, submitted by five countries in 2023. Since then, the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) experts have been assessing the proposal. ECHA's Risk Assessment Committee (RAC) has concluded that an EU-wide restriction is the most appropriate measure to protect human health and the environment and that it would be implementable, manageable and enforceable. The draft opinion of the Socio-Economic Assessment Committee (SEAC) also supports these conclusions. Its final opinion is expected before the end of 2026.

Throughout the process, PFAS manufacturers and their allies have mounted a **coordinated lobbying and disinformation campaign** aimed at weakening the proposal and shifting the costs of pollution onto society. The Forever Lobbying Project documented these efforts, showing that the industry's claims are either fearmongering, false, misleading, or potentially dishonest.

Industry's goal is to avoid as much as possible the regulation of PFAS, by reducing the restriction only to consumer products while largely overlooking industrial uses – despite these account for the vast majority of PFAS emissions.

Sectoral legislation

ACTIONS ON PFAS IN EU LEGISLATION

Limiting and monitoring emissions at source	POPs Regulation (PFOA, PFOS, PFHxS, PFCA)	REACH Restrictions (PFHxA, PFAS in firefighting foams, uPFAS)	Industrial Emissions Portal Regulations and Industrial Emissions Directive	
Limiting concentrations in products and waste	Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation	Food Contaminants Regulation	Safety of Toys Regulation	Plant Protection Products Regulation
Monitoring and limiting concentrations in the environment	Drinking Water Directive	Urban Waste Water Directive	Soil Monitoring Law	Water Framework Directive, Groundwater Directive, Environmental Quality Standards

Several EU laws partially regulate some PFAS substances. However, they only cover some specific PFAS or uses. In addition, just as with the CSS, monitoring and remediation also show a gap between ambition and implementation.

For example, under the recast Drinking Water Directive, Member States can choose to monitor and put in place legal quality standards for either a sum of 20 specified PFAS compounds or total PFAS. However, choosing the “sum of PFAS” approach leaves widespread compounds such as TFA unchecked. Additionally, the associated quality standards are not based on the latest advice from ECHA on the risks of PFAS exposure. Recently adopted PFAS standards for groundwater echo the sum of PFAS standard from the Drinking water Directive, which leaves many ‘regrettable substitutions’ used by the industry unchecked, risking their continued accumulation in the environment. Similarly, PFAS are still not routinely measured in bathing waters, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of PFAS exposure.

In addition, while the Chemicals Industry Action Plan states that clean-up and remediation should follow the polluter pays principle, it remains unclear how the Commission intends to put its commitment into practice: currently, most costs continue to fall on taxpayers and affected communities.





Key asks from civil society

NGOs working on PFAS pollution have aligned on key, clear and simple asks, summarised into the "Stop PFAS manifesto":

- **Stop adding to the PFAS pollution burden: we call for the EU Commission to adopt a broad restriction on the production and use of PFAS by 2030.**

This is achievable through the restriction of the whole PFAS group under the European Chemical Regulation REACH. We support the Universal PFAS restriction proposal prepared by Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands which would introduce a broad restriction on PFAS, including on imported products. We support time-limited derogations for uses where alternatives are still in development and for uses which are critical for the health, safety and the 'functioning of society'. This allows for industry to adapt and innovate. The universal PFAS restriction must therefore be adopted with no new exemptions such as for fluoropolymers. Several sectors and uses not included originally in the restriction should swiftly be addressed in a follow-up restriction. The restriction needs to be adopted during the five-year period of the current Commission which will end in **2029** hence it should be in place by 2030.

- **Address the existing PFAS pollution burden: we call for the EU Commission and all member states to develop swift and efficient plans for monitoring PFAS exposure and for decontaminating soil and drinking water of affected communities and allocate sufficient funds for such remediation projects.**

This is achievable through applying the **polluter-pays principle** consistently, in particular to guarantee that the burden of costs of monitoring and remediation is borne by the polluter, including the producer, rather than the taxpayer.

Resources

- Stop PFAS Manifesto
- PFAS FAQ
- How to Apply the Polluter-Pays Principle to the PFAS Pollution Crisis

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