Maine dairy farm plagued by chemical contaminants may be ‘tip of the toxic iceberg’

By Donna Buttarazzi, York County Coast Star • March 23, 2019 6:56 am

ARUNDEL, Maine — More than two years after learning drinking water and milk tanks on his 100-year-old Stoneridge Farm were contaminated with a class of chemicals linked to cancer and other health concerns, farmer Fred Stone still can’t sell his milk and is losing hundreds of dollars a day, every day.

Jill Brady | York County Coast Star
Kate Manahan of Kennebunk speaks at a news conference Tuesday in Arundel, where she said her drinking water has been contaminated by chemicals best known by the acronym PFAS.

Stone said he never knew the wastewater sludge he was licensed by the state to spread on his fields and other fields across York County contained PFAS, a class of industrial chemicals linked to cancer, fertility issues, hormone disruption and more.

Public health advocates on Tuesday held a press conference at the farm where Stone described the nightmare he says has "ruined" his farm, while officials called for expanded testing and an end to sludge spreading and use of PFAS

chemicals in products.

"Maine must prevent exposure from past pollution and phase out current uses of these 'forever chemicals' to prevent future harm to human and environmental health," said Rebecca Boulos of the Maine Public Health Association.

PFAS are a class of man-made chemicals used to produce waterproof and grease-proof paper, food containers, sticker paper and sticky notes. They were also found in common household products like stain and water resistant clothing, carpet spot cleaners, alkaline cleaners, denture cleaners, shampoos and dishwashing liquids. They also have a range of applications in the aerospace, aviation, automotive and electronics industries.

Laurel Schaider, a research scientist for Silent Spring Institute said PFAS are "extremely persistent in the environment — meaning they don't break down" and said other pollution sources beyond sludge spread on farmland have yet to be identified.

[Maine dairy farm, environmental group fear spread of milk contaminant]

"With over 4,700 chemicals and polymers in this family of 'forever chemicals' we don't yet have a full understanding of the extent of contamination and associated risks," she said.

Gov. Janet Mills this month announced the creation of a governor's task force to mobilize state agencies and other stakeholders to review the prevalence of PFAS in Maine and to put forward a plan to address the chemicals.

Patrick MacRoy, deputy director of the Environmental Health Strategy Center, said the task force is a good first step. He called for the state to identify and test all potentially impacted farms in the state. He said as of Tuesday morning the state has started the paperwork of drafting a list of farms that may have been impacted.

[West Kennebunk well taken offline after discovery of PFAS]

MacRoy said sludge was applied to farms across the state beginning in the 1980s.

"In 2000, over 225 locations statewide, and 38 in York County, were permitted to receive it," he said. "It seems highly unlikely that Mr. Stone's farm is the only one with high level of PFAS from sludge. All the evidence suggests that this is just the tip of the toxic iceberg, and there are likely many other farms, dairy and otherwise, that have similar problems. Until tests are done, that's the only safe assumption to make."

Stone said the state told farmers in the 1980s that spreading sludge on farm fields was the right thing to do.

[Maine task force to review prevalence of toxic chemicals]

"We were told it was our civic duty for two reasons," he said. "First, because it was a great soil amendment that would help increase the productivity of Maine's farms, and second because spreading it across farmland would save our towns from paying substantial tipping fees for disposal."

The sludge spread on his fields and others came from mill waste and the Kennebunk and Ogunquit Sewer Districts, Stone said. He was licensed to spread it, and did so three times a year for about 15 years at about a dozen local farms, including his own.

"Toxic chemicals that I never used, and never even knew about until two years ago, have contaminated my cow's milk, ruined my farming and hurt my family," Stone said. "I want the state of Maine to make sure that no other farming family has to go through what's happening to us."

[Feds allocate another $10M to study chemicals found in NH well]

Discovery of PFAS at Stoneridge Farm came after the chemicals were detected in the water at the Kennebunk, Kennebunkport and Wells Water District's Kimball Lane well in West Kennebunk, which was shut down in 2017.

Tests in the spring of 2016 showed PFAS levels of 50 parts per trillion, below the Environmental Protection Agency's health advisory of 70 ppt set in May 2016. Water district officials waited a year to notify the public, and several months before notifying Stone that a test well on his farm registered PFAS levels in excess of 140 ppt — twice the EPA's health advisory.

Kennebunk Water District Superintendent Norm Labbe last February said the district waited to notify the public of the PFAS that shutdown the Kimball Lane well because the Department of Environmental Protection was still investigating what it called an "emerging contaminant" and asked them to wait until it complete its studies.

[Water well contamination worries persist in South Berwick]

A DEP data report issued Feb. 24, 2017, showed PFAS were detected in water samples from the residential farm well, a small perennial stream and a pond in a gravel pit. DEP findings showed a PFAS level of 50 ppt in the well, 7.93 ppt in the stream and 41.07 in the pond.

DEP also tested for PFAS in the milk tank at the farm, with results showing 690 ppt, nearly 10 times the EPA guideline for drinking water.

Stone said he immediately notified the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Oakhurst Dairy, which had been purchasing milk from him at the time, of the letter from KKWWD in an email dated Nov. 9, 2016, just six days after receiving the letter from the water district.

Oakhurst Dairy stopped buying Stone's milk in December 2016. Oakhurst dairy did not return requests for comment.

[Angus King wants to make it illegal for non-dairy products to be labeled 'milk']

MacRoy said state leadership under the LePage administration swept the problem under the rug, testing only one other farm and two cartons of milk at the grocery store.

"The highest levels of a toxic chemical in milk ever reported, and the only follow-up to determine if the public was at risk was two tests of milk off the shelf," MacRoy said Tuesday.

Labbe said the KKWWD Kimball Lane well has been back online since June 8, 2018, with a full-scale carbon filtration system that has kept the PFAS to an undetectable level. Labbe said the well produces an average of 1 million gallons a day for the district. The carbon for the filtration system costs the district $30,000 to $40,000 a year, he said.

"I am deeply concerned for the health of the vulnerable populations in our community and beyond," said Kate Manahan, a Kennebunk resident whose public water supply through the KKWWD was contaminated prior to the Kimball Lane well being shutdown.

[Milk to flow again at shuttered Bangor dairy]

As a social worker, Manahan said she sees families every day doing everything

they can to support children who have been affected by chemicals like PFAS. She sees it manifested in developmental delays, their inability to focus and more.

"It's happening to all of us, right now we are standing at the epicenter of one of the first identified PFAS locations in Maine. The chemicals leached into our water supply and we drank them. They can be passed along to babies in utero and in breast milk. And I wonder, what are we doing?" she said.

Stone was able to get his dairy operation back online for a while, but at a very high cost, and it has been tenuous. He was able to get the PFAS in his herd's milk down to zero by purchasing a new herd from New York that had not been exposed to the farm's water and feed, installing a $20,000 water filtration system and purchasing his feed from out of state sources where hay is grown in fields that were not spread with sludge.

[Milk spills onto highway after tractor-trailer crash in Portland]

Today, Stone's dairy operation is offline. He thinks some bad feed may be to blame as his milk is testing with PFAS again. He's milking his cows and throwing it all away. The testing has been costly as well.

"Financially, we're sinking," he said. "Besides the filtration system and the feed, our costs include every bill for investigating and testing the water and monitoring the milk, and the loss to the value of our real estate. This whole thing has been a nightmare."

He wants DEP to hold the polluters accountable. Stone said his attorney Jonathan Lambert, of Lambert Coffin attorneys in Portland, filed suit on his behalf in late December against the sewer districts that licensed him to spread the sludge. Lambert did not respond to requests for details on the suit.

[New England states fear contamination increases as EPA weakens rules]

MacRoy wants the state to pay for the testing at the farms and go after the manufacturers for the cost of the cleanup.

"It's critical that we protect farmers as part of this process," he said. "They're innocent victims in this. The state promoted and licensed them to apply the sludge saying it was safe and beneficial, yet it turns out it's not. The state can't just walk away from that.

"As Mr. Stone mentioned, he has been having to pay for all the milk tests himself, which are hundreds of dollars per test once or twice a month. That makes no sense to me. The state needs to take this on."

"I would encourage everyone to take action. PFAS are present in the average citizen, and they are a threat to all of us," Manahan said. "Together we can create and implement laws that can protect us from needless exposure and harm."