

## Public Trust - Episode 2: Fighting Fires

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**MIKE** I have a hard time seeing how these people can live with themselves, to be completely honest with you.

**JORGENSEN:**

**RICHELLE WILSON:** Today on *Public Trust*, we return to French Island to learn how PFAS came to the island and what local residents are doing to secure their right to safe drinking water.

**PENNIE JORGENSEN:** It doesn't matter where you live in the United States. The federal government said this foam had to be used at airports.

**MIKE JORGENSEN:** We were under the premise of the whole time that it was harmless, that we could wade through it and walk through it and it would not hurt us.

**LEE DONAHUE:** We want the safe, long-term alternative. And we don't want to have to pay for it because we didn't create the problem.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** I'm Richelle Wilson. And this is *Public Trust*, a podcast from Midwest Environmental Advocates and Wisconsin Sea Grant. In episode 1, we traveled to the town of Campbell, Wisconsin, which is on French Island.

French Island is an island in the Mississippi River right next to La Crosse. And we went there because the town has been without clean water for years because of large scale PFAS contamination.

**LEE DONAHUE:** I know the traffic's a killer.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** Lee Donahue, resident and town board member, was our tour guide. As we drove around French Island with Lee, we couldn't avoid running into the La Crosse regional airport.

**LEE DONAHUE:** And so you can just see how huge this airport property is. It's miles and miles.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** The island is small. If you're driving from the very northern tip to the southern tip, it takes about nine minutes. And for five of those minutes, you'd be driving by the airport which occupies much of the northern half of the island.

**LEE DONAHUE:** And this is going to dump us toward where the 2001 plane crash was so right up the street from us.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** The plane crash, it's one part of the PFAS story on French Island.

**MARGIE WALKER:** Well, come on in, ladies.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** Are we stepping this way? While we were visiting Margie Walker and Jim Boisen, who live a few blocks south of the airport, they told us what they remember about the incident.

**MARGIE WALKER:** Yeah, 20 years. 2001 was when that plane accident happened.

**JIM BOISEN:** Yeah, that's a strange part of it is I was on the phone talking to my son when it happened, and I heard the plane crash. And I told him-- he's lived up in Rapids and I say, something bad just happened during the air show, and I'm going to go down and find out. So I ran down the street and it was still burning.

A guy took an antique plane and remade it and rebuilt it and everything else. And one part of the tail fell off or something, terrible.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** For decades, firefighting foams made from PFAS were used at the airport for routine training and to deal with emergency situations like plane crashes. The 2001 incident wasn't the first plane crash at the airport. Lee told us that there was an earlier crash in 1970, where AFFF firefighting foam was used.

We also know the foam was used in burn pits, where the fire department practiced fighting fires. Even as recently as 2020, the airport dealt with contamination in the form of AFFF leaking from one of their vehicles.

**MARGIE WALKER:** All right, ladies, have a great day.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** Yeah, thank you. After saying goodbye to Jim and Margie, our next stop was to visit Mike and Penny Jorgensen.

**PENNIE JORGENSEN:** Are we sitting close enough together? I can sit closer to you.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** They've lived in their current house on French Island for 14 years. Like all other residents who live on French Island, they can't safely drink their tap water. And they rely on regular shipments of drinking water from Culligan.

**PENNIE JORGENSEN:** You can tell when the Culligan water day is. Everybody has their bottles outside. So you look up and down the street, and as far as we know, everybody is taking it as seriously as we are.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** One of the reasons we wanted to talk to Penny's husband, Mike, is that he knows his way around the airport. So Mike, I hear that you were a firefighter in another life.

**MIKE JORGENSEN:** I was. That was my real job for 34 years with La Crosse Fire Department.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** Can you tell us what that was like?

**MIKE JORGENSEN:** It's hard to describe in a way. We usually went out the door when it was someone's worst day of their life. So it was gratifying to be able to help people. Saw a lot of different types of emergency scenes and did a lot of different training for different things, which leads right into this whole thing.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** Yeah, that's right. So can you tell us about what-- yeah, how were people trained? And you were around firefighting foam. What kinds of messaging did you get while you were working with that professionally?

**MIKE JORGENSEN:** We did do training at the airport. The ground was unprotected. We would dump barrels of whatever we could get our hands on that would burn. And we would dump it on the ground, light it, and we would use the foam to train, and practice, and learn how to put out fires with the foam.

The way it was explained to me from the older firefighters is that when La Crosse first got set up to be able to use this under fire trucks, the chemical companies' sales people were in town and said that this chemical or this product that we're using, AFFF, aqueous film forming foam, was the same as dish soap. So that's what we were under the premise of the whole time that it was harmless, that we could wade through it and walk through it, and it would not hurt us.

**RICHELLE** When did you find out that that wasn't the case?

**WILSON:**

**MIKE** I don't know. Probably 30 years, 20 years-plus after. I think we started using it in the late '60s, early '70s. I  
**JORGENSEN:** started in 1977, and the fire department said we had been using it or they had been using it for a while.

**RICHELLE** And when did you find out about PFAS in this community here in French Island in your well?

**WILSON:**

**MIKE** Well, when the news broke two years ago, two-ish years ago is when we found out that it had migrated, and we  
**JORGENSEN:** had our well tested. And sure enough, we've got it.

**RICHELLE** And how did that make you feel being a firefighter who worked with all that firefighting foam professionally then  
**WILSON:** finding out that maybe some of that exact same firefighting foam is part of what's contributed to the PFAS contamination and the place you ended up?

**MIKE** It was a requirement that we use that foam and trained with it required by the federal government for all airports  
**JORGENSEN:** to have it, use it, and train with it. So it was out of our hands. I feel bad about it, but like I said, I was under the assumption for many, many years that it was harmless.

**RICHELLE** We spent hours talking to people on French Island who have felt the real effects of contamination from AFFF  
**WILSON:** foam. So I thought surely, AFFF foam has been banned, right? I asked Tony Wilkin Gibart about this. Tony is the Executive Director of Midwest Environmental Advocates.

**TONY WILKIN** There are proposals to ban the use of PFAS or certain PFAS compounds. Some states have taken that step to ban  
**GIBART:** PFAS. The process of setting water quality standards is a difficult one. The process of trying to categorically ban the production or the use or the distribution of certain substances is even more difficult.

The system we have in this country is that you produce something, put it out there and ask questions later. And that's unfortunate. Some companies have voluntarily started to limit their use of PFAS, and that's encouraging.

When it comes to firefighting foam, my understanding is that foam still does contain PFAS. And it's difficult to know because some of these products are proprietary. And so it can be somewhat opaque what is contained in a particular product.

In 2019, the state did put regulations in place about the use of PFAS-containing firefighting foams in non-emergency situations. So for training and testing purposes, there are restrictions on containing that foam and disposing of it. But in an emergency situation, it is very likely or possible that the foam that's being used does still contain PFAS.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** When it came to the chemicals he trained with as a firefighter, Mike had complete trust in the government. Now, years later, as he and his neighbors are dealing with polluted drinking water, well, let's just say Mike's trust in government isn't what it used to be.

**MIKE JORGENSEN:** It's been out here for a few years now that PFAS is for real. It's in the groundwater. I don't see anybody really super in a hurry to get clean drinking water for us on French Island at least, and I can only speak for us.

Not that no one's working towards it, and there's a lot of people working behind the scenes. But do the right thing here is the way I look at it. And I know what it is. It all boils down to money. It's going to cost billions and trillions of dollars in this country alone to get people clean drinking water. And no one wants to own up to it.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** I was really interested in the relationship between drinking water and trust in government. So I talked to Dr. Manny Teodoro, a professor of policy at the University of Wisconsin Madison who studies exactly that.

**MANNY TEODORO:** Water forms this remarkably intimate relationship between citizen and state. We're talking about a government service that comes directly into people's homes. I mean, it's either provided by a government or certainly regulated by a government. It's coming into your house 24 hours a day. You take it into your body. It is a government service that people ingest. It's hard to imagine anything more intimate that the state provides to people.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** For French Island residents like Jim and Margie, this is a deeply personal issue. But it's not just personal solutions they're after. They want to make sure everyone has access to clean, safe drinking water.

**JIM BOISEN:** A disadvantage is a disadvantage. I don't give a [BLEEP] how big your community is. I drink the same water. So I think it's got to be an all-inclusive thing. It can't just be the little communities getting more than the big communities or vice versa or anything. It's got to be all-inclusive.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** I asked Manny to explain the relationship between drinking water and political participation. When are people like Mike and Jim most likely to engage with their elected officials?

**MANNY TEODORO:** Part of what gets people to participate in politics is a feeling that their own health welfare and happiness is at stake. So if I believe that government is important to make my life better, then I'm more likely to participate in politics. Otherwise, I am less likely to participate in politics.

**JIM BOISEN:** More people got to talk. More people got to be informed. There's a lot of people that probably don't even know what PFAS is, never even heard of it.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** I'll admit, I was one of those people. I first heard the term PFAS a few years ago, but I dismissed it as a minor concern distant from my own day-to-day life. I think a lot of people still feel that way. But people like Jim and Margie, Mike and Pennie, and Lee Donahue, our French Island tour guide are working to change that. Not only are they telling their stories, they're actively engaged in finding solutions.

**LEE DONAHUE:** The town of Campbell needs a safe, sustainable long-term water solution. We believe that we may have found that solution.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** Lee said that nearby, the US Geological Survey has a well that is drilled so deep it passes the contaminated aquifer and taps into water called the Mount Simon aquifer. The USGS has been testing it for years, and they've never found PFAS contamination in that aquifer.

**LEE DONAHUE:** So we drilled a test well, that's 500 feet deep. So we drilled through the contaminated layer with what we call a cased well. It's like a giant stainless steel straw, for lack of a better word. So nothing from this upper contaminated layer could push down or get dragged down through the rock, layers and layers and layers of rock to this other aquifer.

And we believe that this can be a safe source of water. If this test well proves to be PFAS-free, it could be one of a series of wells that could be a municipal system. If you're a community that is small, you don't have the resources. To pay for a series of additional wells, we're going to have to go through bipartisan infrastructure law money. We may have to go through the Clean and Safe Drinking Water Revolving Fund.

Tammy Baldwin's office was able to give us \$1.6 million a year ago. This year we've applied for an additional \$3.4 million through Congressman Van Orden's office. So we recognize it's going to take a lot of pieces of the puzzle to be able to afford a municipal system but then also to rip up all the roads and lay the pipe to be able to pipe this to everybody's homes.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** French Island residents like Lee are also engaging directly with government officials to advocate for new environmental health protections. One of the things they're asking for is a statewide groundwater quality standard for PFAS.

While Wisconsin has a water quality standard that limits the level of PFAS in municipal drinking water, there's no equivalent standard for groundwater. That's a problem for residents in rural areas who get their drinking water directly from private wells, where there's not a public utility testing or implementing treatment technology. Here's Tony Wilkin Gibart, Executive Director of Midwest Environmental Advocates.

**TONY WILKIN GIBART:** Groundwater standards are designed to ensure that we're limiting the continuing contamination of groundwater and that when there are exceedances, that responsible parties will be forced to take action. In February of 2022, the Natural Resources Board rejected the groundwater quality standard. And that was highly contentious, it was highly political.

As a general matter, every substance that has a drinking water standard has a groundwater standard. This was the only time that the Natural Resources Board wholesale rejected the recommendations of the department of health services for those water quality standards. One of the natural resource board members was actually on the board past the expiration of his term and cast the deciding vote on that water quality standard.

There were concerns about compliance costs. But lost in that conversation were the human health cost to Wisconsin families that are confronting the health effects of PFAS.

**MODERATOR:** Sitting up there together? You want to be-- OK. Lee Donahue from Tom Campbell and Margaret Larson.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** Lee recently traveled to Madison to testify before the state legislature about how PFAS contamination and the lack of a groundwater standard have impacted French Island, a community that is entirely dependent on private groundwater wells.

**LEE DONAHUE:** For Campbell residents and Peshtigo residents and so many others that live on private wells, it is a hardship, and it's a health crisis. And I cringe to count all of my friends who have fought or succumbed to cancer and many other untreatable health conditions. And I stand here today on their behalf.

My municipality has lived through this nightmare for nearly three years. And yet, now we have hope. We have found a safe system--

**RICHELLE WILSON:** You can hear the emotion in Lee's voice. Her fight for clean water is as personal as it is political. It's easy to understand why some residents are skeptical about Wisconsin's ability to deal with PFAS contamination. But Lee remains hopeful that her advocacy will make a difference for her community and for the future of environmental democracy in Wisconsin.

**TONY WILKIN GIBART:** The idea of environmental democracy is that the government should respond to the concerns that we all have for a healthy and safe environment. And so when our values as a state and as a community demand clean water and demand a response to an emerging contaminant like PFAS that is a significant health concern, the government should have the power, and the will, and the ability to respond.

As folks from French Island are getting involved in the process and making their demands heard, they certainly are exercising power. They certainly are making a difference. And we want to ensure that the state continues to have the means to respond to those demands as it has in the past, as it has in previous decades.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** While PFAS are pervasive and the problem seems insurmountable, this is not the first time we've dealt with persistent contaminants as a society. I wondered, how have we regulated other contaminants? To help answer that question, I spoke to environmental scientist Rashmi Joglekar, who is currently based at the University of California San Francisco.

**RASHMI JOGLEKAR:** PFAS, because of that carbon fluorine bond, they're highly persistent. And there are many other what are often referred to as persistent organic pollutants or POPs that have had successful regulatory outcomes.

So for example, a class of flame retardants, polybrominated diphenyl ethers or PBDEs have been successfully regulated as persistent pollutants on the global scale. And some of them have been regulated nationally. Chemicals like dioxins, which are also highly persistent, have been regulated on the global scale and within the US.

So we have seen certain success stories with other persistent pollutants. That means that there is precedent to regulate persistent chemicals.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** And so what are the kinds of things that people could be doing to effectively push for change?

**RASHMI JOGLEKAR:** I think the first step is really raising awareness to a scale where everybody is informed about the dangers of these chemicals, about the widespread nature of the contamination. And then once awareness is raised, making sure that your congressional representatives are pushing for legislation that tightens regulations on PFAS.

**RICHELLE WILSON:** That kind of advocacy is exactly what people like Lee have been doing. And many advocates are equally concerned about stopping the flow of PFAS at its source.

**MIKE** I've said for quite some time, as a society, we're doing an awesome job of killing ourselves. With the ozone,  
**JORGENSEN:** global warming, the PFAS, it goes on and on and on. And we're making ourselves extinct by everything we're producing.

**LEE DONAHUE:** We still love to live in Wisconsin. We'll always love to live in Wisconsin. But I would just like a little bit more to be done right now with getting us healthy, clean water and other consumable products.

**RICHELLE** This is Peter Davison from the last episode.  
**WILSON:**

**PETER** It's so complicated and yet so simple. Let's just be careful with what we're doing, especially now that we know  
**DAVISON:** what we've done. That's the part I think that's the most baffling about this. It's like we got caught with our hand in the cookie jar, so just take it out now. Nobody wants to do that.

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**RICHELLE** Next time on *Public Trust*, we traveled to Peshtigo, a small community in Northeast Wisconsin to learn how local  
**WILSON:** residents there have been engaged in a multi-year David and Goliath battle with a major firefighting foam manufacturer that has polluted their water supply with PFAS.

**SUBJECT 1:** There's a corporate playbook that they all know how to go by, but there's not a citizen playbook.

**SUBJECT 2:** What are we doing to this planet? What are we leaving? We have to wake up.

**RICHELLE** *Public Trust* is a podcast from Midwest Environmental Advocates and Wisconsin Sea Grant. This episode was  
**WILSON:** produced by Bonnie Willison and me, Richelle Wilson. Script editing by Peg Sheaffer, sound mixing by Bonnie Willison, original music by Josh Wilson, visual design by Ryan Stasiewicz. Special thanks to Lee Donahue Peter Davison, Jim Boisen, and Margie Walker, and Pennie and Mike Jorgensen for sharing their stories.

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