

Testimony in support of House Bill 5019, House Environment Committee Feb. 6, 2025.
by Peter Trafton, MD, Providence Rhode Island

Dear Chair Bennett and Honorable Members of the House Environment and Natural Resources Committee,

I write with strong support for Rep. Speakman's Bill 5019 which prohibits the making, selling, or distributing firefighters' protective gear ("turnout gear") for use in the State of Rhode Island.

PFAS and related "forever chemicals" repel water and oil. They help keep firefighters dry and "protected". For some years they have been added to each of the 3 standard turnout gear layers. With use and wear, PFAS are shed onto the firefighters skin. The dangers of PFAS have been known for decades, but manufacturers didn't alert regulators until 1998. Gradually we have learned that harmful PFAS chemicals accumulate in our bodies. They cause cancers. Higher cancer rates are noted among exposed workers, including firefighters.

PFAS-free turnout gear is available and is being purchased by North American cities. Unfortunately, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) which sets standards for firefighter turnout gear has been slow to revise their PFAS standards. The NFPA is dominated by manufacturers of PFAS and turnout gear. Lawsuits have been filed by firefighters against more than 40 turnout gear manufacturers. The International Association of Firefighters (IAAF), a union which represents over 350,000 professional firefighters and EMTs, has pushed back against the NFPA. They are finally revising the regulations, which still may not be adequate. There are more than 10,000 PFAS chemicals, without standard methods for testing. Both Massachusetts and Connecticut, and other states, have banned PFAS from turnout gear. Rhode Island's consumer PFAS Ban Act of 2024 does not specifically deal with turnout gear. That bill gradually becomes effective, a process not complete until 2029.

I believe that the foregoing provides exceptionally strong evidence in favor of Representative Speakman's bill and strongly urge the House Environment Committee to pass this bill and move it ahead to become a Rhode Island law to protect our firefighters from unnecessary dangers as quickly as possible.

Thank you for considering my comments.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "PG Trafton". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized.

Peter G. Trafton, M.D.