Chilmark resident raising awareness of PFAS after cancer diagnosis

The select board in the up-Island town is looking into subsidies for testing private wells for forever chemicals.

By **Sarah Shaw Dawson** - October 9, 2025



Jessica Roddy spoke up about her cancer diagnosis and the fact that PFAS were found in her private drinking water.

Three years ago, Jessica Roddy was among 19 Chilmark homeowners who decided to test their private well water for PFAS, also known as “forever chemicals.” At the time, the study was anonymous, but this week she came forward to publicly advocate for more testing to be done.

Roddy lives at 64 State Road, a two-and-a-half acre property in a central area in the up-Island town. Nearly a quarter-mile down the road from her is the Chilmark Store, the Chilmark School, and the Chilmark Tavern.

When the test for PFAS in her drinking water came back positive, she ordered a carbon water filter and went on with her routine. While the news was a shock for her and a few of her neighbors, she knew the only way to move was forward — once PFAS are present in a person’s body and blood, there’s no removal process with current medical treatments. Prevention is the top recommendation from doctors. So a water filter it was.

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But this past June, Roddy received dire news. She was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer. Immediately, she was treated with chemotherapy, and had numerous appointments on and off-Island. Her oncology team at the Massachusetts General Hospital tested her for genetic markers for cancer but found none.

Then Roddy remembered the positive PFAS test in her well from 2022. She discussed it with her doctors and they recommended a blood test, which she ordered from a company in California. She completed the test with a few pricks of her finger, and sent it back.

"The test came back last week and I am chock full of PFAS, PFOS and many of the other fifteen 'forever chemicals' that were part of the test — levels in excess of 9/11 firefighters," Roddy wrote in a letter to the Chilmark select board this August.

Roddy said that the doctor told her that there could be a link between the findings and her cancer diagnosis.

"It has a strong link to cancer," she wrote to the town. "This is new territory for human beings."

Roddy's doctors told her that she is the first Islander to have her blood tested for PFAS after discovering levels in her private drinking water.

In an interview with the Times, Roddy said that she is bringing her story forward to raise awareness about water quality. While tests for PFAS in drinking water are expensive and ultimately up to the homeowner if they have a private well and aren't connected to town water supplies, Roddy feels it's essential to take steps to prevent more of these chemicals.

The Chilmark Select Board agreed after hearing her testimony in a meeting on Tuesday night.

"It's really brave of you to come," Select Board Chair Marie Larsen said to Roddy. "I've been trying to educate myself because I was not around — on the board — when the last study was done in 2022."

The meeting room was packed with other Chilmark residents, which underscored some concern about PFAS in private wells, an issue that has come to a head a few times in recent years. The chemicals have been found in the water at the Chilmark School, the airport, and a few other sland.

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PFAS and other “forever chemicals” are still being researched by agencies and environmentalists. Broad understanding about the effects “forever chemicals” could have on people is still underway.

“To provide some context, in 2019 Mass DEP (The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection) proposed PFAS regulations including stringent drinking water standards of 20 parts per trillion,” Chilmark Board of Health agent Anna McCaffrey said in the meeting on Tuesday. After those regulations were set, more testing was done at various properties and town water sources across the Island to try to find the source. There’s been no published source of PFAS in Chilmark yet.

“One property tested beyond the established limit … which was Ms. Roddy’s property,” McCaffrey said.

McCaffrey said the Massachusetts DEP did additional testing of fourteen more properties after finding those levels of PFAS at Roddy’s property, but didn’t find any more properties with excessive levels.

Some testing came to public attention on the Island back in 2018 when interest peaked due to PFAS being present in firefighting foam that was used in drills. The chemicals were found at the airport, then a few years later, hazardous levels were discovered in a private well in West Tisbury. These instances set the stage for the anonymous study of private wells at Chilmark homes in 2022, but follow-up was sparse, according to officials present at the time. Some Islanders spoke up in the meeting about the importance of towns being involved in making PFAS testing widely available to residents.

“Across the Island, in every town, we need our public officials to step up, recognize the threat these dangerous chemicals pose and help educate the community about testing and water treatment systems, so our citizens are not left to find out the hard way as too many already have,” Oak Bluffs resident Ewell Hopkins said in a statement to the Times. He was present at the meeting on Tuesday night and brought up similar concerns to the select board.

Matt Poole, current Chilmark select board member and former board of health member in Chilmark, said he’s encountered information about PFAS before. He encouraged local homeowners to reach out to the Chilmark Board of Health with their concerns. The board also discussed the possibility of subsidies for local residents to offset the cost of these tests, which are estimated at a few hundred dollars.

In the public results from the 2022 study, Roddy’s private well was the highest concentration of these chemicals. On a public database that shows all 19 properties, five wells had documented amounts of PFAS, and one — Roddy’s — had levels documented above 20 parts per trillion — the state standard limit. In the second test of her property, the concentration of PFAS was found at over 50 parts per trillion.

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“There have been PFAS found in other wells, and as we speak tonight there are even more wells that have turned up with single-digit values for PFAS in the parts per trillion,” Poole said. “There are some results [in Chilmark] that are healthy double digits, unfortunately.”

While the state has a standard of 20 parts per trillion of PFAS, the federal government has a more stringent standard for drinking water for “forever chemicals.” The Biden-Harris administration last year announced the new regulations that say that the two most common compounds of PFAS cannot exceed 4 parts per trillion in drinking water, which is around the lowest level detectable.

The laboratory manager at the Wampanoag Environmental Laboratory in Aquinnah, Andrew Jacobs, said drinking water isn’t the only place “forever chemicals” are found, but it is concerning to find any concentration at all in the water people are drinking.

“These chemicals exist pretty significantly in our everyday lives unfortunately — from raincoats to nonstick pans,” Jacobs said in an interview with The Times.

But consuming these chemicals in excess does have significant and documented health risks. Cancer, compromised immunity and reproductive health, and liver and thyroid conditions are among those listed, although finding a connection between the chemicals and health conditions can be a challenge for doctors to prove.

While public water sources are required by state law to complete Consumer Confidence Reports that are published each year, private wells are the responsibility of the homeowner, with the governing body being each town’s board of health.

According to Poole in Tuesday’s meeting, two carbon filters are recommended to filter these “forever chemicals” from drinking water. And some real estate agents who were present said they recommend PFAS testing when homeowners purchase a property in any up-Island town where private wells are used as a source.

But much of the public information about PFAS is at the apex of understanding, including the effects on the individual and family. The executive director of the Vineyard Conservation Society, Samantha Look, said this information is frightening, but more importantly, new, and should be treated as such.

“Our community has been in a reactive mode. Hopefully this news from Chilmark is an opportunity to change gears Island-wide. We need to understand the potential sources we already have, how we mitigate them, we need to protect against new sources arriving on our shores and make sure our community members are well educated, have access to water testing and understand potential exposures. This is a pervasive and serious environmental and community health issue of a sort that I am not sure we are accustomed to dealing with,” Look said in a statement to the Times.

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intention by bringing this information to the public eye is to simply educate possibility of PFAS, and encourage them to research the issue themselves, and to

call on town support to do so.

“My goal here is to make sure that the Town is doing its very best to educate people about well water and the importance of testing … I was not the only well in the neighborhood with a positive test but many, many wells have not been tested and no effort has been made to investigate the source of this contamination,” Roddy read from her letter to the onlookers in the brightly-lit Select Board meeting room. “We live in a beautiful place, but it is not immune from extremely dangerous environmental issues. Nowhere is.”

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