



City officials believed a new South Philly turf field was PFAS-free. Not true, experts say.

Three experts separately told The Inquirer that lab tests on turf that was recently installed at Murphy Recreation Center are "misleading."



City officials said that the new artificial turf field at Murphy Recreation Center in South Philadelphia was free of PFAS, based on test results that experts now say is "misleading."

Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer

by David Gambacorta and Barbara Laker
Published Feb. 23, 2024, 5:00 a.m. ET

A new artificial turf playing field, the centerpiece of a \$7.5 million upgrade of South Philadelphia's Lawrence E. Murphy Recreation Center, is supposed to be free of [PFAS](#), the chemicals that the EPA has linked to cancer, asthma, and a range of other health problems.

Sprinturf, the turf's manufacturer, told city officials that the surface didn't contain the so-called forever chemicals, and provided a lab report to support its claim, a spokesperson for the city's [Rebuild](#) program, said earlier this week.

But three independent experts who separately reviewed the test results told *The Inquirer* that the lab test, compiled by Michigan-based RTI Laboratories Inc., is flawed and inadequate, and that the turf likely still contains the chemicals.

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The city had, in the past, pledged to install only artificial turf that didn't contain PFAS in renovations of public fields.

"Purely misleading testing that no reputable lab would do," [Graham Peaslee](#), a physicist at the University of Notre Dame, and a widely recognized expert on PFAS, wrote in an email to the newspaper.

"We have plans to follow up with the manufacturer about the test report," Kira Strong, the executive director of Rebuild, said Thursday. "We care deeply and foremost about the safety of our children and families that use this field."

Peaslee — along with Kyla Bennett, a former EPA official who is now the director of science policy for [Public Employees for Environmental](#)

environmental nonprofit in Michigan — explained that RTI used a modified test that would normally be used to identify PFAS in water, even though turf is a solid.

The lab's PFAS detection limit was about 20,000 times higher than what is typically used for a water sample, Peaslee said, meaning that lower amounts of PFAS could still be present in the turf, but wouldn't show up in the test results.

“Their detection limits were way too high, designed to *not* detect PFAS,” Bennett said. “The city was bamboozled.”

Gearhart said that the turf should have undergone an organic fluorine test, which would detect a wider array of potential forever chemicals,

“There are thousands of PFAS chemicals,” he said. Without the fluorine test, the results show just “a snippet of the universe.”

Lloyd Kaufman, a vice president and analytical chemist at RTI Laboratories, acknowledged that the test results, completed in 2022, don’t guarantee that the turf is PFAS-free.

Instead, he said, the lab’s findings just mean that PFAS didn’t rise to the test’s limits.

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On Tuesday, The Inquirer [published Risky Play](#), a report that explored concerns held by parents, coaches, and toxicologists about a possible link between the chemicals in [artificial turf fields](#), and cancer cases among youth athletes.

In response to that article, the city’s Department of Parks and Recreation told

free.

Sprinturf supplied RTI with two to three turf samples to test, Kaufman said. The company didn't instruct the lab on which detection limit to use, he said, nor did it request an organic fluorine test.

Several messages left for Justin Reddy, president and CEO of South Carolina-based Sprinturf, were not returned.

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Melanie Taylor, president and CEO of the Synthetic Turf Council, a national organization that represents manufacturers, builders, and infill material suppliers, disclosed in a letter to California legislators last year that the industry would need several years to [develop PFAS-free turf](#).

The city plans to include four new baseball and softball fields, and a dozen multipurpose fields, in a \$250 million makeover of Franklin Delano Roosevelt Park. All of the fields will be outfitted with artificial turf.

Maura McCarthy, the CEO of the Fairmount Park Conservancy — which has [helped raise \\$100 million](#) for the project — has said that the turf that will be used at the park will be tested to ensure that it doesn't contain PFAS.

Kaufman says he “cringes” whenever someone claims that a current turf product is “PFAS free.”

“It’s a matter of defining zero,” he said. “Ten years from now, as the testing methods become more refined and more technologically advanced, that line of defining zero changes.”

Kaufman was asked whether he had told Sprinturf that its product, which ended up on a South Philadelphia field that will host soccer matches, and baseball and softball games, was PFAS-free.

“I can’t say that I did,” he said. “I don’t recall every conversation I’ve ever had.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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