

text by Maarten van Gestel

All Dutch people, including you, have PFAS in your blood. The 'eternal chemicals', so called because they hardly break down, were developed to make pans non-stick and raincoats waterproof, but they have permeated the environment and are now even raining out of the sky.

They accumulate in our bodies, and at excessive concentrations, they can cause cancer and other diseases. After an initial nationwide blood test, the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) concluded last month that almost all Dutch people don't simply have PFAS in their blood, but excessive levels.

If the RIVM had done that research What if Robert Bilott hadn't answered his phone over 25 years ago? What if he hadn't listened to the West Virginia farmer who saw white foam on a stream, whose cows were dying gruesomely, and who pointed out the nearby DuPont landfill? Would the Netherlands have been so concerned about PFAS in 2025 if Bilott had not gone to war with DuPont? "I honestly don't think so," Bilott (60) says via video link from his Cincinnati office. The lawyer—gray hair, neat suit, modern art on the wall—looks serious, but speaks calmly. "History shows that the industry was incredibly effective at concealing all this information."

He says that companies like 3M and DuPont already knew in the 1970s that PFAS are present in human blood. They knew in the 1980s that these substances are carcinogenic. "But they managed to convince authorities that there was nothing wrong with it. They did everything they could to keep the truth out of scientific publications, out of the knowledge of the public." The companies made billions of dollars from rain-repellent fabrics and Teflon pans.

But in the late 1990s, that concerned farmer called. His neighbor knew Bilott's grandmother, who had proudly told her grandson that she was an environmental lawyer in the big city. "I normally defended companies like DuPont. I wanted to take on this case, as a favor to a friend. I thought it would be simple: DuPont had exceeded the legal limit for a known chemical, and that we could easily rectify it."

Things took a different turn. Bilott became entrenched in the dangers of the then-unknown eternal chemicals, specifically PFOA, one of thousands of substances in the PFAS family. Since then, he has been pursuing lawsuits against PFAS manufacturers nonstop for 25 years. This led to enormous damages, a ban on PFOA, and stricter guidelines for drinking water. Bilott first came to the public's attention in the 2019 Hollywood film *Dark Waters*, starring Mark Ruffalo as the reclusive lawyer. All that attention was a bit uncomfortable, Bilott chuckles, but he's happy that PFAS received such global attention. And that large-scale blood testing and legal action are now also underway in the Netherlands.

Because the sister factory is located in Dordrecht of the infamous one from West Virginia, where DuPont changed its name to Chemours in 2022, but where local residents are still concerned.

Over 25 years ago, the concerned farmer called you. When did you realize



Pollution [interview](#) | When attorney Robert Bilott took on a case against chemical giant DuPont, maker of PFAS, in the late 1990s, he thought he'd quickly have a resolution. But he's still fighting: against disinformation and to prevent further environmental damage.

# This lawyer revealed a major PFAS scandal 25 years ago





Famed attorney Robert Bilott in his "document room" at Taft Law Firm in Cincinnati. PHOTO MEG VOGEL / IMAGN IMAGES

There seemed to be a connection; that substance was clearly the cause. Then they examined DuPont employees and saw that they, too, were developing cancer more often. While I was reading this, DuPont was still discharging PFOA into the water. It wasn't known to environmental agencies as a hazardous substance.

Did the rich and powerful DuPont try to stop you, to intimidate you?

Absolutely. In the beginning they cooperated. But once I started asking for documents about PFOA, their attitude changed. My boss was getting calls telling me to “tone it down.”

When I shared my concerns with regulators, DuPont tried to silence me, claiming I was acting unethically. DuPont smeared me in the media, claiming I was making up all sorts of things to scare everyone.

But the tide turned. On behalf of over 70,000 citizens, Bilott took DuPont to court in early 2000. A massive settlement was reached in 2004. DuPont paid hundreds of millions of dollars in damages and was ordered to install water filters to prevent thousands of times the safe level of PFOA in drinking water. Long-term health studies were conducted, which demonstrated the link between PFOA and six diseases.

In the US, production of some of the most toxic PFAS has been halted. A very strict limit has been in effect since last year.

'They influence scientists, governments and the media. It's a war on multiple fronts.

for the amount that may be contained in water. A new settlement with DuPont and 3M, estimated at over \$14 billion, will allow water companies to remove PFAS from drinking water.

But there's no real change, says Bilott. Every legal step is followed by a fierce counterattack. "Not just in the courtroom, but also in influencing scientists, governments, the media, and environmental agencies. It's a war on multiple fronts."

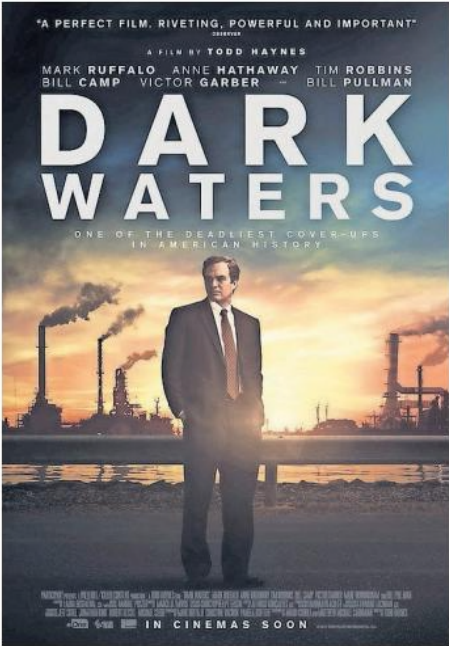
One astonishing aspect, both in the United States and around Dordrecht in the Netherlands, is that environmental agencies did nothing for years. How is that possible?

"The authorities have been repeatedly misled. There was no problem, they were told, and they believed it.

The substances have been pumped into the economy in such large quantities that the industry now has a new argument: the problem is too big to regulate, affects too much of the economy, and costs too many people their jobs. Bizarre. These companies made billions and billions of dollars from the substances they dumped on us. They should bear the economic consequences and not pass the bill on to customers, the government, or water companies.

Everyone in the Netherlands has too much PFAS in their blood, research shows. Is there a solution in sight or is it just getting worse?

"The research from the Netherlands is worrying, but not surprising. PFAS is everywhere and affects everyone, whether you are a PFAS



Poster for the 2019 film "Dark Waters," starring Mark Ruffalo as a lawyer.

products used or not. What's changed is that we're aware of it. And more importantly, we're seeing how this problem is being addressed. With regulations for how much PFAS is permitted in water and in new products. And with innovations that can destroy PFAS and remove it from the soil and our bodies.

US President Donald Trump is taking major steps back on climate policy. Are you concerned about the approach to PFAS?

There's a different approach to climate policy, indeed, but for public health and water, the policy has been fairly consistent, at least so far. Although companies are challenging the strict drinking water requirements, there was recent confirmation that they will continue to be enforced. The awareness that PFAS causes health damage is so widespread that I think it will remain a priority.

The EU is working on a ban on all PFAS. Is that the solution?

In the US, we focused too much on one specific PFAS. It took years to ban just two—PFOA and PFOs. Companies are constantly tweaking them and introducing new substances like C64 or C6. Then everything starts over again. So I believe we need to address this holistically.

You can't keep litigating forever. What do you absolutely want to achieve?

"I will continue to fight against the enormous lobby and disinformation directed at governments. And to raise awareness of the problem. I help legislators protect people. The US now has a good standard for drinking water. This should become international, because people ingest most PFAS through water. There are technologies to remove the substances from water. These are expensive, but they should be used more widely.

Do you ever regret taking on the farmer's business? That you didn't just keep doing what you were doing so you could have more time for your family? "No."

Why not? You're right: it wasn't easy for me personally. But my family, my three sons, are doing well. One just graduated as a lawyer, another is starting his law studies. The third is a professor.

It was difficult, but I think my family agrees that getting this information out was a worthy goal."