

SLUDGE VICTIMS: VOICES FROM THE FIELD

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ABSTRACT

Individuals around the country are filing reports of adverse health effects they say are related to exposures to sludge. This article reviews some of those reports as well as officials' reactions and responses to them.

My husband and I have been married 45 years and have three daughters and seven grandchildren. We live on a 57-acre farm in Alton, New Hampshire. I first got involved in sludge in 1996 when a neighbor about a half-mile up the road petitioned for a zoning change to allow the land spreading of sewage sludge on his farm.

After researching the issue extensively and reading the 1995 report by Charlotte Hartman, Coordinator of the National Sludge Alliance, "Impact of Sludge Disposal on Human Health and the Food Chain," I concluded sludge spreading posed significant risk to human health and the environment.

We defeated the zoning change in Alton by an 8 to 1 margin. But my sludge research continues up to the present day. Thanks to computers and the Internet I am in constant and immediate communication with sludge victims and people around the country who share our concerns.

I have prepared a 300-page booklet on sludge victims, which is referenced in the July 2, 2002 National Academy of Sciences (NAS) report, "Biosolids Applied to Land: Advancing Standards and Practices." The NAS report concludes that the current sludge rule may not be protective of human health because it is based on outdated science and that there is a serious lack of health-related information about populations exposed to treated sludge.

Many people around the country have suffered serious illness and some have died from exposure to land-applied sewage sludge. Here are some of their stories.

In **Riverside County, California**—Tina Childers is packing up. After her 5-year-old daughter experienced chronic sinusitis and recurring bacterial infections, after her husband ended up in the hospital with a staph infection, and after she herself was treated for nose and throat infections, her doctor recommended they move. For months, the Childers family had been breathing the air from farms near their Menifee, California home that use treated sewage sludge as fertilizer. “They sometimes dump five out of seven days,” Childers says. “It smells like dead bodies.” *US News & World Report*, July 27, 2002

After sludge was spread within 1,000 feet of their home on May 28 and 29, 2002, Nancy Morris of **Livermore Falls, Maine**, says she and her husband suffered dry heaves, lung congestion, uncontrollable coughing, thick yellow mucous, irregular breathing, gasping for breath and a skin rash which raised big welts on her husband’s back and itched intensely. *Personal communication to Helene Shields, July 11, 2002*

Arcadia, Florida—The last two years have been the worst of Diane Ballard’s life, and she blames that on the mountains of mud-like treated sewage near her home in Arcadia, Florida.

The first thing that hit her when the sludge trucks began dumping last spring was the smell: “You couldn’t walk outside,” she says. “You couldn’t do anything outside.”

Then the illnesses started: pneumonia, bronchitis, and pleurisy. “You name it, I ended up having it,” says Ballard, 44. “I’ve never been that sick before in my life.”

Molly Bowen who lives in the same neighborhood as Diane Ballard, says she and her six children, ages 3 to 19, have gotten headaches, sinus infections, burning ears and eyes, fevers, and severe diarrhea from the sludge dumped nearby.

Another resident with three children who lives in the same neighborhood stated: “My kids would get sick like clockwork every time they’d start dumping. We chose to live in the country to get away from pollution and we got the worst kind you could imagine.” *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, July 4, 2002

In **Grand Bay, Alabama**, where Synagro sprays sewage sludge on farmland, nearby residents report a multitude of health problems, including bronchitis, asthma, headaches, skin lesions, gastrointestinal distress, burning in their eyes, nose, and throats, and swarms of flies.

Gary Schaefer of Grand Bay, states: “I have called, emailed, and sent letters to the EPA and Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) complaining of several things I felt were in violation of 40 CFR 503. Nothing is ever done by these agencies as they are prime sponsors of the sludge spreading.” *Personal communication to Helene Shields, June 19, 2002*

Waterford, Loudoun County, Virginia—In a letter dated June 5, 2002, Barbara Rubin details the unprecedented spate of severe illness suffered by

herself and others in her community after sewage sludge was spread. The Waterford residents experienced severe respiratory problems, bronchitis, sinus infections, flu, nosebleeds, gastrointestinal illnesses, pneumonia, skin lesions and rashes, headaches, burning eyes, nose, throat and lungs, cardiomyopathy, cancers, and other illnesses. *Letter from Barbara Rubin dated June 5, 2002, to Virginia State Officials and Legislators*

In **Lenhartsville, Pennsylvania**, Judy Fasching reports that when the farm near her home started sludging again last year, she and her neighbors suffered nausea, tearing eyes, and difficulty breathing. Judy developed boils and her husband was hospitalized with undiagnosed infections

Judy writes: "I know of several unreported cases locally—that people do not know why their children are always sick. Another one has lupus and has to leave her house for several weeks when the sludging starts because she becomes very ill—her body cannot take the effects of sludge." *Personal communication to Helene Shields on May 14, 2002*

Desoto County, Florida—Mari Hollingsworth says her 11-year-old son "VC" contracted rotavirus, a serious intestinal disease, two years ago after he rode his dirt bike through a pasture where sludge was spread. Within hours he was suffering a fever and vomiting and required intravenous fluids and several days of hospital care. *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, March 7, 2002

In **Culpeper, Virginia**, after sludge was dumped on a neighboring farm in spring and summer 1999, Lori Handshy suffered severe headaches, respiratory problems, constant cough, nagging fatigue, nausea, severe diarrhea, high fevers, cold and flu-like symptoms, and pneumonia in her right lung.

Christmas night, 1999, "I awoke in the middle of the night unable to breathe. I literally was 'choked' awake by something in my windpipe. I was choking and gasping for air."

Lori wrote letters to Dr. Alan Rubin, EPA sludge office, and countless other public officials. She made repeated phone calls to State and County Health Departments. Her pleas fell on deaf ears. Her illnesses were dismissed as "psychosomatic." Her local Board of Supervisors told her: "It is legal, so you will have to live with it."

Cal Sawyer, the Department of Health official who oversees sludge spreading in Virginia told Lori sludge was "perfectly safe and no-one else has ever complained." Sludge company "Recyc Systems" told her to "prove it" when she said the sludge was making her sick. *Personal communication to Helene Shields, April 2000*

Desperately worried about Lori's declining health, after only three years in their lovely farm, Lori and Scott Handshy sold out, fled Culpeper County and escaped to Rappahannock County, Virginia, where there is a ban on sludge spreading. *Washington Post*, August 23, 2001

Ron Letcher of **Brandywine, Maryland**, describes the symptoms he and his family suffered after Class B sewage sludge was spread 200 yards from his home:

“Our well water developed a bad odor which kept getting stronger and stronger. We had to drink bottled water for several weeks.”

“(The sludge) makes our noses and throats burn. Our throats get sore. Our eyes were burning and got red and bloodshot and we got real bad headaches. After that we felt nauseous. We also suffered nasal congestion, shortness of breath, and breathing difficulties, especially when the wind blew across the sludged field in our direction.”

Mr. Letcher remembers a County Health Department agent telling him: “Sorry, there’s nothing we can do about the way the wind blows.” *Washington Post*, August 6, 2001

“The *Washington Post* photographer was here for about an hour and a half. She started to complain, “My throat is getting sore . . . my eyes are burning . . . I have to get out of here . . . I am getting a headache.” *Telephone statement to Helene Shields, August 20, 2001*

James Lear of **Louisa County, Virginia**, became a foot soldier committed to fighting the growing use of sludge after he woke up one morning last fall covered head to foot with mysterious boils. He said his doctor told him that the skin eruptions, which lasted for three months, might be connected to airborne bacteria from the treated sewage used as fertilizer on a nearby pasture.

“All the people up and down the road had problems,” Lear said. *Washington Post*, August 6, 2001

Desoto County, Florida—Tracy Hoppel is convinced that the sludge-dumping site next door to them is making her children ill—over and over again. The physician’s office told Tracy that Taylor had a bronchial infection, probably due to something she breathed in. Both girls have had the rotavirus, a fecal-oral airborne virus that causes extreme vomiting and diarrhea. Lyndsey almost had to be hospitalized for related dehydration.

“This is an airborne virus,” Tracy Hoppel said. “I know in my heart, with the north winds blowing towards us, it’s more concentrated in the air, and it’s blowing right on our property.” A mile away, it reeks and the smell of human waste clings to your nostrils and feels like it’s blocking out the air you need to breathe. We’re prisoners in our own house.” *Sun-Herald, April 18, 2001*

In the French Valley-Menifee, Winchester area of California, residents blame sludged fields for health problems, including nosebleeds and respiratory ailments.

“We’ve had sore throats, sore throats with blisters, bloody noses, rashes,” said Athena Geges. “My husband never gets sick, and he has been sick for three weeks now.”

Other residents in Winchester, Menifee, and surrounding areas say they are experiencing similar symptoms, as well as headaches, diarrhea, and respiratory troubles. The illnesses cropped up after sludge was spread on neighboring properties, they said.

Janine Matelko of Menifee said her son Matt, 11, who suffers from an irregular heartbeat and other ailments, has struggled with worsening health problems

since the family moved to Menifee two years ago. She and her husband believe his illnesses are linked to airborne contaminants from the sludge. “It has become a public nuisance and has affected the quality of life of people and their health,” said her husband, Mark Matelko.

“Two years ago, they started dumping (sludge) down the street from me,” said Margie Newman, who is raising three grandsons at her home in Winchester, California. “My grandsons started having rashes. They couldn’t breathe.

“Our children are deathly ill,” Newman said. “It is amazing how everybody is for the environment, yet out there we are being poisoned.” *The Press-Enterprise*, February 15, 2001

Germantown, Ohio—Don Carpenter describes what his family has gone through since sludge was spread on an adjacent farm: “It smells so bad it makes your head hurt. We were all nauseous when the sludge was first applied; afterwards we suffered headaches, sore throats, throat irritation, burning in the nose and nasal congestion, abdominal distress including cramps, and breathing difficulties including shortness of breath, asthma, and bronchitis. We feel we are more prone to illness since our exposure to the sludge.” *Telephone statement to Helene Shields, November 2000*

Culpeper, Virginia—Doyle Shrader, Sherri Settle, and two other families found their wells contaminated after sewage sludge was spread on an adjacent field in November 1999. On March 19, 2000, James Burns of the local Health Department wrote to Shrader warning against using the water in the well because it “was definitely contaminated.”

Shrader said the water “smelled like dead crabs . . . it smelled just like that shit they put on the fields a couple of weeks before.” He described the ailments he experienced after his well went bad: “Symptoms are difficulty breathing, coughing up large chunks of mucous, sometimes clear, sometimes streaked with blood . . . I am very weak, no energy . . . stomach cramps, headaches, and skin rashes. In December and January of 1999, I was so sick I could not get out of bed. *Personal communication to Helene Shields, May 5, 2000*

Wayne Lenn, who owns the property where Bio Gro spread the sludge, stated: “We had no problem with that well for thirty years. Then the same week they spread the biosolids, the well goes bad.” *Culpeper News, April 13, 2000*

Culpeper, Virginia—Sherri and Larry Settle blame sludge for the January 2000 death of their Great Dane, which drank water in the sludged fields. Sherri Settle was hospitalized on January 28 and 29, 2000, for an intestinal virus. She said her water came out of the tap “black like charcoal” and she developed “pink, scaly stuff” on her trunk and legs where the water touched her body in the bathtub.

Appeals from the Culpeper sludge victims to local, county, and state health departments were ignored. Doyle Shrader kept careful records of all his sludge inquiries in a thick black binder. “In the Army I learned that you don’t open your

mouth unless you've got a piece of paper to back it up . . . I've talked to everyone but God and nobody cares." *Culpeper News*, August 2, 2000

Elizabeth Flewelling of **Unity, Maine**, says after sludge was spread on a neighbor's property their wells were contaminated with coliform bacteria and were undrinkable. She and her husband suffered headaches, gastrointestinal problems, and diarrhea, weight loss, fatigue, sores in their nose, accelerated aging, blood problems and a host of other ailments. *Personal communication to Helene Shields, June 21, 2000*

Webster, New Hampshire—The family of John Ceriello reported suffering nausea, dry heaves, burning eyes and throat, and worsening asthma after lime stabilized Class B sewage sludge from Lowell, Massachusetts, was spread on an adjacent property. "The nearby brook has been destroyed from the sludge. There used to be brook trout and now they are gone." *Affidavit dated March 16, 1999*

Columbiana County, Ohio—Kathy and Bob Hunt and Patti Baker filed lawsuits saying a sewage sludge reclamation project contaminated their drinking water, adversely affected their health, and created an offensive stench for two years. "At least one other family has sued over the sludge-dumping and settled out of court with the companies. Terms of the settlement remain secret." *Akron Beacon Journal, September 10, 1996*

Greenland, New Hampshire—In the dark of the night in October 1995, a convoy of tractor-trailer trucks rolled through the sleeping residential Tuttle Lane neighborhood and dumped 650 tons of biologically active, "lime stabilized" Class B sewage sludge from Portland, Maine, on adjacent hay fields.

Residents of the neighborhood awoke to a stomach-wrenching stench, which was followed by weeks and months of sickness . . . and death for a 26-year-old man, Shayne Michael Conner.

Three of the neighbors were rushed to the hospital for breathing problems; three others were treated for outbreaks of lesions on their backs, chests, and limbs.

Jonathan Balthaser, 24, developed a skin rash that he said resembled a bad sunburn. Cathy Hamilton, a registered nurse, was bedridden with nausea and severe diarrhea.

On the day the last load of sludge was hauled in, Dave Delfino, a retired plumber, said a foul stench filled the air that burned the inside of his nose so bad it bled. *Boston Sunday Globe, February 15, 1998*

Joanne Marshall (Shayne Conner's mother) states: "As days and weeks went by, we became sicker and sicker. Not just my family, but our whole immediate neighborhood. We all shared the same symptoms; first nausea and vomiting followed by severe stomach cramps and migraine headaches. Then fever and flu-like symptoms, more respiratory. There was a continual battle of thick mucous, one that made it hard to swallow and discharge. At times it appeared as if our reflex system had slowed because you would gag on the mucous and

sometimes choke to dispel it. Often it would wake you because your breathing passages were blocked by it.

. . . the evening of Thanksgiving (1995), I kissed my son, Shayne of 26 years, goodnight for the last time. Around four a.m. that morning, I was awakened to a frightful scream from my other son, who was home from college during the holiday. When I ran to the room, Shayne appeared unconscious, yet he seemed like he was gasping. 911 was called and all I could do was hug him and wait for the paramedics. We spent what seemed like an eternity in the hospital waiting room, only to be told my son was dead. (Statement by Joanne Marshall on <http://www.whistleblowers.org>)

On October 13, 1994, 11-year-old Tony Behun rode his dirt bike through freshly applied sewage sludge on a strip mine site in **Rush Township, Pennsylvania**. He returned home covered head to toe with black, putrid-smelling material. His mother had him remove his clothes in the garage and bathe immediately. She hosed his bike off to remove the sludge.

Two days later, Tony had a lesion on his arm and leg, a sore throat, fever, vomiting, and headache. Six days later he was in a hospital emergency room, his fever climbing. The child was then rushed by helicopter to Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh where he died the next morning from a virulent staphylococcus aureus infection . . . eight days after he rode his bike through the sludge.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) first blamed Tony's death on an infected bee sting. Subsequently, they apologized for this false statement. Later they suggested he was infected by sewage in a creek or by a chipmunk bite. Then they claimed the *Staphylococcus aureus*, which killed Tony, is not a pathogen found in sludge. (It is—see EPA's "Pathogen Risk Assessment Methodology for Municipal Sewage Sludge Landfilling and Surface Disposal," PA/600/R-95/016, August 1995.)

In yet another misstatement of the truth, the Pennsylvania DEP went on television November 15, 2000 and stated, "NIOSH investigated the case and concluded Tony's death was not caused by sludge." (Totally false—never happened—NIOSH only concerns itself with work-related health and safety issues.)

Continuing its inept investigation, the Pennsylvania DEP recently went to the sludge site, took a sample of the six-year-old sludge, had it analyzed, and announced on their web page that there was no *Staphylococcus aureus* in the sludge. (EPA says one year is the absolute maximum for survival of sludge viruses and bacteria in soil.)

Dr. David L. Lewis, research microbiologist for the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency's National Exposure Research Laboratory in Athens, Georgia, stated in an email to Dr. Joel Hersh of the Pennsylvania Department of Health: "An otherwise healthy 11-year-old boy rides his motorbike across a mining area ankle-deep in sewage sludge. Within hours he develops lesions on an arm and a

leg, runs a high fever within two days, and is dead in eight days from *staph aureus* septicemia.

“It shouldn’t be surprising that covering a child with wet caustic sewage sludge (containing strong irritants to skin, e.g., lime, ammonia, organic amines) is likely to give him a superficial *staph* infection that may progress to septicemia. (Some of the *staph* comes from what gets flushed down toilets in hospitals where people are being treated for virulent strains of the organism, and what goes into sewer lines from mortuaries where they drain all the bodily fluids.)”

Dr. Lewis speaks about sludge as a private scientist because EPA administrators, who promote the land-spreading of sewage sludge and disagree with Lewis as to the adverse impact on human health, have forbidden him from speaking about sludge as an agency employee. As this journal goes to press, Dr. Lewis is being forced out of his job by the EPA and is seeking whistleblower protection so he can continue with his work.

Invariably, complaints about sludge-related illnesses to local, county, state, and federal health and environmental agencies are ignored. The officials who are supposed to be protecting public health are instead protecting the sludge dumpers. Sludge victims are repeatedly told at all levels of government that the EPA says sludge cannot be making them sick and that they are hysterics or hypochondriacs — or that their ailments are psychosomatic. Meanwhile, people are getting sick and dying from exposure to sewage sludge.

For more information on people and animals sickened from exposure to sewage sludge:

<http://www.sludgevictims.net>

<http://www.cfe.cornell.edu/wmi/Sludge/Incidents.htm>

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