

The Story of Someone That Does Not Exist

This is the story of someone that does not exist, or is told that they do not exist. You see, I am one of the growing number of victims of land applied sewage sludge. We have all seen articles on this "soil amendment" in the papers recently. The EPA and the Health Department assure us that it is perfectly safe for us to live with and have on our food. I am (luckily) living proofs that, yes, there are consequences to forced exposure to sewage sludge.

It all started back in the spring of 1999. My husband and I were trailering our horses back from our friend's house in Culpeper, Virginia. Our friend was telling us that a farm down the road a few miles had applied sewage sludge on the grazing fields. This sludge was just dumped out and left there. On the fence by the gate was a sign stating the company name and their phone number. Although I was not too concerned since, after all, it was at least 5 miles up the road, my husband was quite uneasy. He told me that it was not the "poop" he was worried about, but the host of other toxins and contaminants that he was worried about, namely the heavy metals. The area that we lived in was very wet, blackjack soil. It was swampy almost year around. My husband was worried about the water systems, since it flooded frequently around the area. I remember driving home that night saying "you don't think any of our neighbors would be dumb enough to do that, do you?" and he replied with "I don't think so, but I would hope not". I shrugged it off as the majority of people do.

Life went on as usual and basically I thought nothing more of it. Our farm was 20 acres with a 40 acre narrow and long tract of 600 yards separating us from the nearest working farm next door. This farm consists of approximately 400+ acres and was on the northern side of our farm. I had permission to ride on the 40-acre tract and took almost daily walks there with my pony and dog. Come July, my husband told me that he had seen "the trucks" in the neighbor's cattle field approximately 1/3 of a mile from our house, dumping sludge very early in the morning. In the evenings, there was an odor, however unpleasant, but since this field was one of the furthest from our farm, it was only overpowering at night and in the misty mornings and life went on.

I made my first phone call to the Zoning Committee in Culpeper. I wanted to know why I was not notified of this, since I am the only home to the left and directly downwind of the property (with an open field separating us). I was told that since I was not directly adjacent to the property, that I did not have to be informed of the sludging and that I was an "oversight". My pleas not to apply any closer to my property fell on deaf ears.

I then called the next in line that I could think of, the County Health Department, to complain. Desiree Lopasic came out to "inspect" the sight. Copies of this were sent to the VA State Department of Health (Kal Sawyer), Clayborne Taylor (spreader), Aubrey Rozell (zoning) and Bio Gro (now Synagro). The "inspection" consisted of a visual overview by Ms. Lopasic that visually observed "buffers" (flags), noted the pH, Temperature and "normal" odor.

All summer, I had nagging, painful headaches. Not a normal headache, but a type that I have never experienced before. The pain was constant, with no amount of Tylenol helping it. I can only tolerate children's Tylenol, so that is what I tried to take to stop the pain. I began to feel like not doing much of anything at all. My head constantly hurt, but I did begin to make a connection when the headaches would stop if we went to eat in Fredricksburg or take the dog to training in King George. I started to develop a dry cough. Constant, dry, nagging cough. The pony developed the same type of cough, too.

We read some information on the internet about sludge. It did not sound like good stuff, but so far, the connection between my constant headaches and nagging fatigue was not drawn. We brought some of the information down to the neighbor, who informed us that the farmer renting her fields brought her an application to sign for "cheap fertilizer". She did not read it, had no idea of what it was, just signed the approval. She let Scott pick up a couple of "samples" of the sludge to test. If we could test it and it showed up as "bad", she would not allow it on the other fields.

Well, then came the first roadblock. No one could test it. Those that would charged several hundred dollars to test it for the "allowed" ingredients. That did not count testing for pathogens not listed. We did not have that type of money, so we let the subject drop, hoping that she would read the information and not let any further dumping continue.

In October/November time frame, the nightmare began. I looked out on that cool and windy day to see "the trucks" dumping in the fields 600 yards away from my house. Not only were the winds approximately a steady 15 miles per hour, but our farm was downwind, as always, from the prevailing Northwesterly winds. The house SMELLED!!! Outside was unbearable. I called my husband. Yes, he had seen the trucks in the morning in other fields. He told me to make some phone calls to whatever government office may be in charge.

Now the true dog and pony show began. I phoned the dumping company (Clayborne Taylor) to complain that my entire house was smelling. I informed him that I knew what was in sludge and that I did not want it on my property. He was fairly unconcerned when I told him that my whole house "smelled like crap". See, there were no trees between me and the fields being dumped on. He said that he could tell the workers to "work on another field", but by then they were just about finished, so it was too late.

I then phoned the Health Department. They acted like I was crazy. Kal Sawyer told me that it was perfectly safe, that no one up until my phone call had ever complained, that they were doing it for 20 years, and again, it was safe. I told him that I did not believe him. He tried to convince me, but I wanted proof. The proof, he said was in the "fact" that there was no documented evidence of illness.

As you can see, calling got me nowhere. Once again, I "trusted" in the authorities that are so concerned with our "health" and went on with life. This time however, it was different. The smell was overwhelming. It was so unbearable that you could hardly stay outside. It made you sick to go out there. In the evening, just as the sun had set and nightfall came,

the smell was so overpowering that you would gag. Your breath would literally be taken away.

What followed was one of the worst nightmares that I ever went through. Within the next few days, I fell terribly ill. I had nausea that I could not make go away. I felt sick all day and woke up in sweats during the nights. This scared me because I have low blood sugar and must eat small meals throughout the day.

The headaches got worse. They were so painful that they woke me up at night with horrible stabbing pains. The fatigue worsened. I tried to avoid going outside, but I had livestock to feed and a boarders horse to care for, so I had to go out there. The cough got more persistent. I was now developing weird stomach "flu like" symptoms. Throwing up for no reason was particularly bothersome to me. The diarrhea was present with really bad stomach pains, unlike the usual ones I had experienced if you eat something that does not quite agree with you. This was severe, ongoing and painful..

After two weeks, I had my husband take me to the doctor. I feared a possible brain tumor. It struck me as a little funny that when I got to the doctor in Northern Virginia, my nausea felt a bit better. The doctor gave me medication for gastroenteritis. The medication helped little and I returned to being ill after returning home..

The nausea gradually went away after a few weeks. I could finally eat without being sick. I continued my routine of taking care of my livestock and taking my walks in the field next door almost daily. The smell was still intense, especially at night and during the wet mornings. The dumping continued, as I was told that they could only sludge 25 acres a day.

I once again called Desiree Lopasic to complain. She told me that she would check the site out. She offered to come over and "talk" to me, but I said that it was not necessary, just go and check the sludge site out. She never did. Later on in public meetings, she told the Board of Supervisors that no complaints were ever filed. She also stated in letter to Anne Peterson of the VA Department of Health that I "refused" her coming over to my home. Once again, turning the burden back onto me as the guilty one.

On Christmas day night, I kept coughing and coughing. Something felt as if it was tickling my throat into my windpipe. It was almost like an allergy. I thought that maybe something was growing, until I realized that things don't bloom in the winter. That night 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. It was a scary feeling not to be able to catch my breath. This continued every half-hour (looking at the clock). I almost knocked my husband awake to take me to the emergency room, but I really did not want to awaken him. After a few hours of this terrifying experience, I fell asleep and woke up as if nothing had happened.

The next week followed with what seemed like a cold, but stayed in my lungs. I had a persistent dry cough, tickling windpipe and the feeling of mucus when there was none. I thought maybe that I had caught a cold. I continued my outside activities as usual.

Then I had the worst case of diarrhea for days. Nothing that I ate would stay inside. My husband also had this for a longer period of time than I did. I was stunned on how I could possibly have gotten so many illnesses back to back in such a short amount of time. By now I was losing weight.

By mid-winter, the smell was not as bad during the daytime. However, whenever the night fell, the atmosphere was just right for the smell to rise up and sit thick in the air. I would continue to choke if I went outside at this time. I remember gagging and trying to breathe when I would break ice out of the watering stations that winter. By this time I would just cry, feeling totally defeated.

One night after one of our daily rides in the field next door, the dog and me came down with a "stomach" flu-like thing. Pain, diarrhea and nausea were present in me and the dog was having severe diarrhea and had to be taken to the vet. He was blowing his coat and lethargic. In another day or so, my husband also was sick again. I thought maybe I had passed something on to him, but to the dog, I was not convinced. I now had developed painful swellings in the lymph glands under my arms that would come and go frequently.

Now is when we really started looking into the sludge on the Internet. We got as involved as possible with the neighbors. We found out that we were not the only ones sickened by the sludge and the smell. It was scary when they told us that they had the same exact symptoms at the same time. We were not interacting before now, so it in no way was due to contact between us. This time is when we also began to speak with other "victims" of the sludge dumping industry. We learned that some people are affected more than others, some are not outwardly affected at all. However, we felt that if it could make even a few people ill, then something should be done to correct it.

We fought as hard as we could by going to Board of Supervisors meetings loaded with information. We were told that "it is legal, so you will have to live with it". Our pleas fell upon deaf ears. The local paper would not run a story. The reporter at the time was told "not to make waves" and was not allowed to write anything up for me.

By now, the cough was constant. I was beginning to wonder what was going on with my body. I had not suffered respiratory troubles in the past. When springtime came around the farmer began to till the sludge in to the soil. This threw a cloud of dust up into the air twice the height of the tractor itself. My symptoms worsened. When I went outside, my eyes would swell shut. I would sneeze and cough uncontrollably. It was like an attack of the allergies from hell. I do have a tendency to have very mild allergies in the spring when the grasses grow, but nothing close to this. I began to lose weight for no reason this time.

Up until now, we had thought that we were "safe" for a few years, since sludge may only be dumped every 3 years. Then we got a notice in the mail that the farmer across the street was applying to dump sludge (we were considered to be a directly abutting property this time). We banded with the 6 surrounding neighboring homes to protest this at the Board meeting. The farm in question was only a bit over 100 acres of land. Our homes were either directly abutting it, or separated by the road with creeks connecting the properties.

The Board again could have cared less about the neighbors and passers by who told of their illnesses. There were several people who complained of feeling ill or being unable to breathe when driving by the farm. Others were affected, but afraid to come forward because the "powers that be" wanted the sludge. The County Supervisors were so set on allowing sludge that they even turned a deaf ear to the 84-year-old neighbor and her daughter that would be directly adjoining the sludged fields.

I wrote to Al Rubin (EPA), Anne Peterson (State Health Commissioner), countless state and national representatives, the sludge companies and each individual board member. I wanted to see a complete list of the constituents that could possibly be found in the sludge. My doctor had requested this so that they would know what I was exposed to. All I ever received were cold, distant letters from Anne Peterson stating that "no one has ever gotten sick". Therefore, I did not exist. The Health Departments pro-sludge cheerleader, Desiree Lopasic, did give me a list of heavy metals tested for in the Alexandria sludge. No pathogens, no other follow up. She told me it was "psychosomatic".

Not one board member ever wrote me back. No one from the EPA wrote me back. Of course, if they did, perhaps this would mean that they would be admitting that I exist. Bio Gro never wrote back. In phone calls to them I was called a "trouble maker" and told to just keep my mouth shut. Calls to Recyc Systems were equally frustrating. I was told to "prove it" when I said that I was sick. I told them to prove that I was not.

Whenever I would ask for scientific evidence proving the safety of sludge, all that I would receive was a packet of pro-sludge documents from VA Tech, the dumping companies, the Health Department and excerpts from the EPA 503 sludge rules. Everything was a case of the fox guarding the hen house. VA Tech studies were funded by the sludge dumpers and based on controlled field-tests to show how "economical" it was to use sludge. Nothing scientific was ever presented to me. Nothing proving the safety to human, animal or environmental health was ever presented to me.

In March, my husband came home from work and upon entering the house said "that's it, we are moving". I was particularly dumbstruck due to the fact that I had just come home with brand new wallpaper for the dining room walls.) We had only lived at the farm for 3 years. We had no equity and were just to the point where we were not living paycheck to paycheck. I tried to convince him otherwise, but he stuck to his decision. He could not take the pressure of going to meetings and being overwhelmed with sludge and watching me get sicker and sicker.

We began looking for a new place. The choice came down to Rappahannock and Shenandoah counties. Rappahannock had a ban in place and Shenandoah had a moratorium on sludge dumping until it could be proven safe. We wanted to stay close enough for my husband to commute to work. I managed to stave off the dumping companies and the farmers from further dumping by sending them letters stating that if we suffered any more damages we would consider it a "personal attack" and take further action.

This did nothing for my health, though, which continued to plummet downhill. As we were leaving at the end of June, I came down with a fever. I had horrible chills for a couple of days. I would wake up soaking wet. I had no appetite. By this time I was approximately 84 pounds or less. On the last night in our home, I had to go to bed at about 10pm. I literally had no energy to continue with the cleanup of the house and moving of boxes.

The next day, I was able to stay the night in the new house. My husband stayed at the old house to finish moving things out. I woke up feeling horrible and sweating. After closing, the realtor took me up to Northern Virginia. All I wanted to do was go to the doctor, as something was terribly wrong. My mother took my temperature when I got there and it read 104.6. She took it again in disbelief. It was the same. She phoned the doctor who had me come in immediately. The look on the faces of the office workers was upsetting to me. Blank stares were what I was met with.

The fever was high enough for them to send me for x-rays. I don't remember much of the doctor visit, only that they put me on an "adult strength" antibiotic and told my mother to watch me. Normally, I only need ampicillin, or the "pink kids stuff" as I like to call it. They wanted me to go the hospital should I become delirious. The x-rays were clean, so they had no idea what was wrong with me. From previous visits, they knew I was forcibly exposed to sludge. However, since they never knew exactly what was I was exposed to in the sludge, there was no way to test me for anything in particular.

My mother took care of me for the week (she is a Registered Nurse). I remember lying on the couch and waking up to her touching me and exclaiming "oh my God!" due to how soaking wet I was from sweating. The fever would go up and down all day and all night long. I would literally be drenched, so drenched that she would have to change the blankets and entire pillow around me.

I came home to our new house after the week and started going about the business of starting over from scratch. We were literally starting over with the few remaining livestock that we did not sell off, but no outbuildings or facilities to house them in. I had fencing to put up, animals to feed and water and shelters for my husband to build. We did the minimum that we could afford to get away with. I still was not feeling right, though. The cough was getting worse now. My energy was low and I was beginning to cough so badly that I was relegated to the couch at night.

One day, I was in the local Co-op purchasing fencing supplies. The kind ladies were showing me what they had when at the checkout I began gasping and trying to breathe. One of them asked me if I had an inhaler. I managed to get out the reply of no, that I did not know what was wrong, but that I was going to the doctor the next day. I could not continue my conversation, got out to put the stuff in the van and that I would just go home. I continued choking all the way home.

The next day, the fever was back and the doctor visit showed that I had Pneumonia in the right lung. I was thinking, you have got to be kidding me, pneumonia in July? I stayed at my parent's house for another week. I had to be close to the doctor should I need to get to the hospital. The only thing that kept me out of the hospital was my blood oxygen, which was surprisingly normal. I still say to this day that it was due to the fact that I kept on working outside with the chickens and pony even while sick.

Since the first round of antibiotics did not work, they put me on a stronger one, the type that they give intravenously in the hospitals. It was hard to breathe. I was afraid that I was going to die. I had never had serious breathing difficulties in the past and was not sure of how to handle this. I stayed on the couch at night since laying down flat made me choke. I coughed up clear liquid like water. The only way that I could breathe was to take short, shallow breaths.

The second round of antibiotics worked. I began to feel better, the fevers stopped and my breathing slowly became normal again. Throughout the fall, I caught a cold and flu more easily than normal, but my health was slowly returning and I was feeling better again.

I have been asked to put an ending on this story. However, as it stands right now, there is no ending. I wish I could say that all is well, but it is not. The Virginia State Supreme Court found Amelia County's ban to be inconsistent with state law. Therefore, our ban in Rappahannock County is now in jeopardy.

I live with the fear of KNOWING what I am up against. You see I DO exist and I DO know how this by-product of the wastewater treatment process can affect others and me. However, I also know how victims are turned away by the very agencies empowered to protect us.

Thank you, Lori Handshy

LoudounNATS Postscript:

The above letter was written sometime in 2000. Lori recalls that it was about Oct/Nov 2000. Lori indicates that she moved to new farm in July 2000 where she continued to be ill. She reports now in 2003 that both she and her pets still have health problems.