

# Poisoned Paradise: Stories from Cedar Valley

by Lisa Arkin,  
Executive Director, Beyond Toxics

Last year, on the morning of October 16th, something went very wrong in a quiet rural part of southwestern Oregon. A helicopter pilot loaded his tanks with a chemical concoction of five different herbicides mixed into petroleum oil and flew seven times over dozens of homes in Cedar Valley, a residential area near Gold Beach. People working on their property and in town immediately started falling ill. Soon, dozens of complaints poured in to state agencies about a possible connection between the mysterious helicopter, a strong chemical smell and severe health problems. The people who reported symptoms had several complaints in common including coughing up blood, blurred vision, falling caused by vertigo, excruciating headaches and vomiting.

The story is sad and familiar. Aerial pesticide spray sickens rural Oregonians, their farm animals and pets. Why do timber companies spray herbicides? It's a common forestry practice used to kill weeds and native plants that might compete with new conifer trees. The pattern of clear-cutting forests, replanting a monoculture commodity, followed by multiple aerial herbicide sprays is tree farming, not forestry.

## KATHYRN'S STORY

### The Right to Safety on your Private Land and in Your Home

*"Never in my life did I think I would become an activist, but when helicopter sprays poisoned my dog, I decided I had to stand my ground."* - Kathryn Rickard, Cedar Valley resident

Kathyrn Rickard, descendant of a three-generation logging family, is pro-timber—she has thrown chokes and felled trees—but she is taking a stand against aerial pesticide spraying.

Kathyrn stepped outside on her deck that day in October because she heard a helicopter flying back and forth over her property. She leaned on the railing and immediately felt a burning sensation on her skin, which quickly turned into a rash. A headache kicked in, quickly worsened and soon became unbearable. Her husband, Eric, also got sick soon after arriving home from work. He knew something was terribly wrong, but neither he nor Kathryn immediately connected their illness with the helicopter spray. It was easier to assume they might have the flu. They were convinced otherwise when the symptoms did not subside. Then their dog started showing symptoms of poisoning.

Even now, seven months later, Kathryn and Eric continue to have headaches, trouble breathing, and often feel exhausted. They worry about the fate of Mr. Leo, their beloved dog. He has lost more than 40 pounds, can barely stand and is wasting away to a shadow of his former self. | **Continued on p. 2 --**

**UPDATE:** Mr. Leo had to be put down on May 20th. He will be missed.



Kathryn with the family's beloved dog, Mr. Leo, a few months after the spray



Mr. Leo, prior to the 2013 spray

*The wild and scenic Rogue River at the mouth of Cedar Valley on the Southern Oregon Coast.*



# Poisoned Paradise: Stories from Cedar Valley, cont.

## KATHYRN'S STORY, cont.

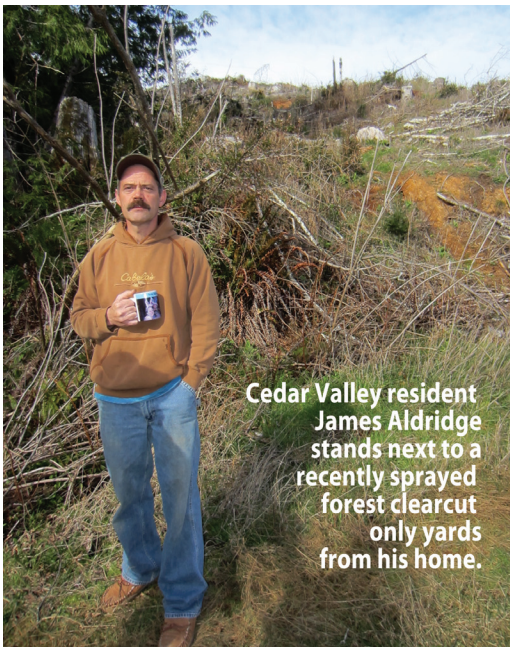
### How Oregon's forestry laws put Kathryn and her family in harm's way and violated their rights:

Oregon's Forest Practices Act is an over forty-year old law that regulates timber operations, including spraying herbicides on clear-cuts. Washington State, Idaho and other western states require substantial buffer zones for residential areas. In contrast, the Oregon Forest Practices Act leaves Oregon with the weakest and least protective forestry policies. Nothing in Oregon's law stops a helicopter from loading a mix of toxic chemicals into tanks and flying directly over homes.

The Oregon Health Authority reports that herbicides sprayed by a helicopter can drift as far as four miles. Kathryn was exposed while she stood on the deck of her home because Oregon law removed the required protective buffer zone around homes to safeguard families in the 1990s.

### Solution Proposed by Beyond Toxics:

Oregon should ban aerial herbicide sprays in the western part of the state where steep terrain, wind, rain and air currents make spraying poisonous chemicals from a helicopter an extreme health hazard for neighboring communities and all life downstream. The US Forest Service ended all aerial sprays in the 1980s.



Cedar Valley resident James Aldridge stands next to a recently sprayed forest clearcut only yards from his home.

*"We moved up here and bought this home about 27 years ago. It was just a paradise for us... what we always wanted. Raised our family here."*

- Pamela Aldridge

James' illness started with intense joint pain, so bad he became paralyzed and had to go to the emergency room. His doctors ruled out cancer and arthritis; to help him walk they prescribed chemotherapy and steroids.

"My doctor told me that there is something poisoning my blood, but he can't figure it out," said James. His wife Pamela helps him get dressed in the morning. At age forty-six, James faces an uncertain future. "The pain is out of this world. The pain medicine does not touch it. It literally feels like someone is pouring battery acid in my joints. I've dropped over 45 pounds and I'm wasting away. My liver is failing. I'm told I may not make it."

## JAMES' STORY

### The Right to Clean, Safe Drinking Water

*"I'm a logger. But I can't work anymore because of being sick. I think it's the herbicides that they spray that made me sick. I wouldn't like for another human being to go through what I'm going through."*

- James Aldridge, Cedar Valley resident

James Aldridge went from full-time logger, active fisherman and motorcyclist to applying for total disability. He became sick after commercial timber property a few yards from his house was clear-cut and sprayed in 2012. His health declined significantly after the October 2013 spray. His drinking water comes from a small stream that starts inside that clear-cut. At his water intake, the company left a ten-foot buffer of small, bedraggled trees, not enough to stop chemical drift or run-off. He continues to drink the water from the stream because he can't afford to buy bottled water.

### How Oregon's forestry laws put James in harm's way and violated his rights:

Oregon does not require a timber operator to protect a stream that flows into drinking water. Oregon laws are strikingly different from Washington and Idaho, where no-spray buffers of hundreds of feet are required to keep pesticides out of drinking water and all surface water.

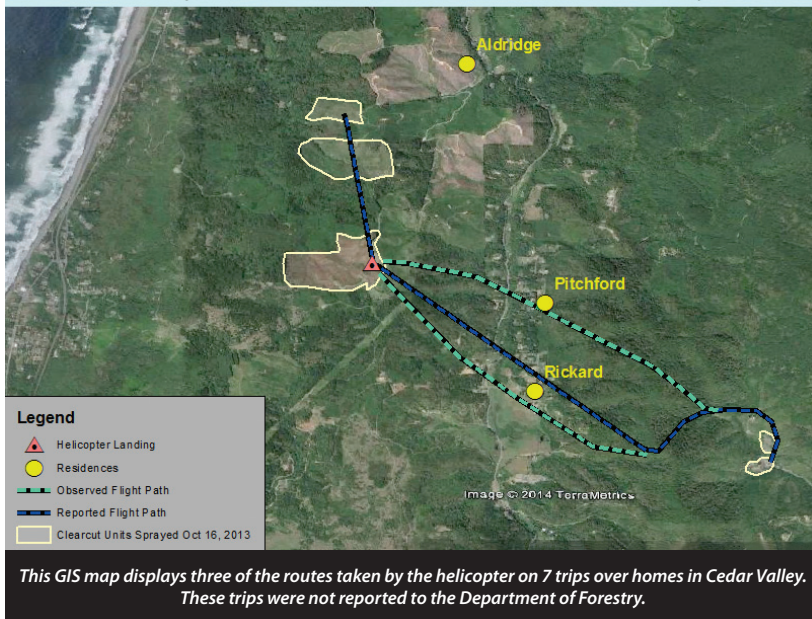
### Solution Proposed by Beyond Toxics:

Following Washington State's example, Oregon state foresters must ensure that domestic drinking water sources are clearly identified and specific actions are required to protect all streams and lakes with buffers. Oregon needs to adopt wide "no-cut" and "no-spray" buffers that fully protect drinking water resources. Pesticides known to contaminate water need to be banned from these vulnerable areas.



# Poisoned Paradise: Stories from Cedar Valley, cont.

Cedar Valley October 16, 2013 Aerial Herbicide Spray Map



## THE PITCHFORD FAMILY STORY

### The Right to Know for Doctors, Veterinarians, Parents and Patients

*"The animals don't lie. One of our horses is blind and another one lost over 400 pounds. My kids and I felt sick."*

- Melissa Pitchford, Cedar Valley resident

Four generations of the Pitchford family live on their sprawling 55-acre property, including six children, six horses, one goat, and two dogs. Melissa Pitchford and her children, grandma and great grandparents were home when the helicopter circled their property. They smelled the chemical immediately. The foal, Molly, panicked and two horses escaped. Melissa and her daughter ran across their property trying to catch the horses and return them to the pasture. Melissa was distraught that she and her daughter were gulping in air laced with chemicals as they raced around. Their older son, Bailey, started feeling a severe headache and sore throat.

She called her husband, Dr. Tom Pitchford, chief medical officer for Curry County Health Department and asked, "What should we do?" He replied, "Take the kids and leave the property immediately."

By the end of the day Molly was blind in one eye. One horse lost over 400 pounds over the next months. Their garden is ruined and their pasture has a patchwork of dead grass. The family bought bottled water for months because they feared the stream that supplies their drinking water was contaminated. Melissa filed a complaint with the Oregon Health Authority to report what happened, however state officials did not take samples for evidence of pesticides on their property nor helped her family find out what poisoned the children and their horses.

Melissa believes a pattern of illness is impacting her children and farm animals. Her family has incurred property damage and sizable expense to care for the horses. The vegetable garden they planted as a family project now stands ruined and unused.

### How Oregon's forestry laws put the Pitchford family in harm's way and violated their rights:

Oregon does not require helicopter spray pilots to tell anyone, not even the state agency, when they are going to spray, what they are going to spray, and what route they will take to spray. Pesticide applicators keep paper records in private file cabinets, and only for three years. It takes months for state officials to get these records.

### Solution Proposed by Beyond Toxics:

Oregon must establish a system that requires helicopter pilots to submit spray application data electronically to state agencies within 24 hours. Those records should be made available to the public upon request. Accurate and timely information will help health care providers and veterinarians treat patients and better understand the role pesticides play in environmental health.

See these stories on YouTube at: <http://tiny.cc/3f7sfx>





## Poisoned Paradise: Stories from Cedar Valley, cont.

### Stand with the people of Cedar Valley for a just and healthy future

I worry that our Cedar Valley friends, people I've come to know and care deeply for, will experience debilitating long-term health effects from exposure to a toxic tank mix. Are my worries realistic? Absolutely!

When sprayed into the air from a helicopter, these toxins become a dispersed aerosol that is likely to be inhaled or absorbed through the skin. While the October 16th spraying caused Cedar Valley residents a variety of immediate symptoms, health effects can also manifest over time. Genetic damage from pesticide exposures may occur gradually and be passed on to future generations.

The illegal exposure to forestry chemicals suffered by residents of Cedar Valley is another chapter in the ongoing story of communities harmed by herbicide exposure from aerial helicopter sprays. Until the laws and policies change, Oregon's rural families will remain at risk for the same kinds of devastating impacts the people of Cedar Valley have suffered.

Oregonians are wrestling with questions of responsibility, accountability, and ethics that arise from chemical trespass. Why is Oregon's government lagging behind other northwest state governments in defending and enforcing public health standards? Protection from involuntary exposure to pesticides is a basic human right. Oregonians deserve better from our government. Beyond Toxics will continue to advocate for an ethical stand that values the right to be safe from chemical trespass.

### What can you do?

You can help us take a stand to protect our communities and homes, our children and Oregon's drinking water. Let's avoid a repeat of the tragedy of Cedar Valley's poisonings.

Beyond Toxics is collecting stories of Oregon communities and bringing their voices to our State Legislature. Bring us your story, volunteer your skills in science, research or media, become a member and talk to your elected leaders.

**Meet the people of Cedar Valley in our powerful, new YouTube video:** <http://tiny.cc/3f7sfx>

Bees, a key indicator species, is another cause we feel compelled to act upon. For more than two years, Beyond Toxics has been working to save bees from a precipitous decline linked to pesticides known as neonicotinoids ("neonics"). Now, thanks to our proposal and work with forward-thinking city councilors, Eugene has passed the first ban of neonics in the nation!

**Please join us to celebrate  
"America's most bee-friendly city!"**

Our **Bee-Fest** will be held in a Eugene pesticide-free park: Washington Park Community Center, Saturday, May 31st.

[www.BeyondToxics.org](http://www.BeyondToxics.org)  
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**Saturday, May 31st 1-3 pm**  
**BEE-FEST!**  
at  
**Washington Park Community Center in Eugene, Oregon**  
**2025 Washington St.**

Sponsored by  
**Smith Family Bookstore**

Join  
**Beyond Toxics**  
in celebrating  
**America's**  
**bee-friendliest city:**  
**Eugene, Oregon!**

**Coconut Bliss**  
hosts  
**Scoops for a Cause**