
TOXIC PLUME

Pollution Puzzle

Residents' viewpoints differ on news of chemicals lurking beneath their homes

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Joanna Larson and Chris Daugenti have a lot in common.

They both work at the University of Oregon - he's a cook; she's a receptionist. They live next door to each other on Haig Street in the Trainsong neighborhood, each in their first-ever home.

Their shared love of gardening is evident in Daugenti's trellis and pristine lawn, and Larson's front yard that's ringed with iris or roses, depending on the season.

But their reactions were very different when, one morning in May, they learned - from a map on the front page of *The Register-Guard* - that their homes were above a toxic chemical plume.

Larson shrugged it off. "I figure I've lived here almost 20 years. If there were any health effects, they've already got me," she said on a recent evening while sipping tea in her garden.

Meanwhile, Daugenti was floored. "Everything was going along fine and then all of a sudden this," he said.

"I can tell it really hit you hard," Larson said to Daugenti.

People vary widely in their reaction to risk and uncertainty.

Some of the people who live above the underground plume are spooked.

Others say plenty of other risks - driving a car, for instance - are more worthy of their worry. Still others say there's little they can do, so why worry.

No health or environmental authorities can tell the rail yard neighbors for certain whether the toxic plume underfoot will increase their personal chances of developing cancer or suffering other harm.

"There's no way we can absolutely say, 'Yes we will see seven excess cases in people exposed over a lifetime.' But the scientific research that has been done to date indicates" a probability of an increase in cancers, said Michael Fernandez, an expert from Oregon State University who, through a federally funded program, has helped neighbors understand the issue.

Some neighbors are uneasy, fearing that rashes or breathing problems are related to the underground solvents.

David Becker, who lives in a house above the plume in the River Road neighborhood, said the woman who owned the house before him died of lung cancer. "Sometimes I just break out with a rash all over," he said.

Michael Waldorf lived on Haig Street with his wife and two children for a half dozen years before selling his house and moving two years ago, largely, he said, because of fears about pollution.

In Trainsong, he said, his family was sick all the time. His wife had severe allergic reactions. "Her skin would break out in rashes. she'd have trouble breathing sometimes," he said.

That all changed when the family left the neighborhood, Waldorf said. "We haven't been sick and we used to be sick all the time. There was a lot weighing on our immune systems being in that neighborhood."

Waldorf was among many residents who for years fought the J.H. Baxter wood creosoting plant near the Trainsong neighborhood, arguing that chemical fumes from the plant were harmful.

The company responded by installing new equipment to limit fumes.

With news of the groundwater pollution, some neighbors say they want to move.

Larson says she will bide her time. "I'm still not that concerned. I guess I'm a fatalist at heart," she said.

Daugenti is frantic, however.

"I've been trying to get as much information as I can. I've been talking with the DEQ. I've talked to the Health Department.

"At first I was very shocked. I was very afraid. I didn't know if I could eat the vegetables I grow. I didn't know how bad my house is. I still don't.

"I'm just trying to gather as much information as I can, and then I'm going to make a decision about what I'm going to do. That's all I can do.

"I don't want to move but if my health is in jeopardy, that's what's got to come first. If the risk is that bad, walking away might be the only choice," he said.

But Trainsong is a neighborhood for people who don't have a lot of choices, said Eugene City Councilor Andrea Ortiz who lives in Trainsong herself.

Forty percent of the residents live below the federal poverty line, according to the U.S. Census.

"Please frame this gently because I don't want to say disparaging things about my community," she said. "But I didn't choose to go to Trainsong. I had to go there because of my economic situation. I chose to stay there and work as part of the

community for the good.

"A lot of people don't choose to buy homes in the Trainsong neighborhood. They end up there. Does that mean because you're poor you have to put up with this stuff? No," she said.

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