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‘A refugee in my own town’

by Lee Scanlon

A West Coast man says he’s become a refugee in his own town because of “chemical assault”.

Kevin Boyes, 48, said exposure to herbicides had ruined his health. He and his wife Kathryn, 45, had been living in their Honda Odyssey van for eight months, trawling the Coast searching for somewhere to live safe from chemicals.

They had previously camped for two years in a tent in bush at Charleston’s Four Mile, 33km south of Westport. They fled after he was poisoned by road verge sprays, he said.

“I was extremely ill. I went back to where we were staying at Charleston, which is well off the road, and I just got worse and worse and worse.”

His symptoms included burning mouth and lips, upset stomach, headache, blurred vision, fuzzy thinking, chest tightness and nausea.

“If I don’t get away from the exposure, I just can’t stand. I just lie down. You can’t think. You can’t talk.”

He had had to quit his farm work and go on an invalid’s benefit. His wife had given up her part-time information consultant’s job at the Westport i-Site to help look after him.

“At this stage, Kathryn has been able to drive me out of every situation. I don’t know what would happen if I was on my own and go down like that.”

His situation meant his daughters, aged 18 and 13, both from a previous relationship, could not visit him. One was also chemically sensitive.

On Tuesday, Mrs Boyes was caught in an aerial pesticide operation when she returned to Charleston to tend to their milking goats, he said.

They dumped the clothes she was wearing, and she washed in a creek, but she remained so



Kevin Boyes and his wife Kathryn, keeping distance between them, beside the van they have been living in for eight months. (Photo – Lee Scanlon).

contaminated he felt sick when she was nearby.

When The News met the couple yesterday, Mr Boyes was resting inside their van and his wife was keeping her distance outside in the drizzle.

“When she hops in the car, I’m just getting an exposure that’s strong enough to make me very ill...” he said. “Now I have to pack up and get out from my wife. I’m really angry about it. It’s chemical assault and I can’t do anything about it.”

Their van was unsuited to living in, he said.

“We just put the front seats back, and sleep in them. We have to find somewhere where they haven’t sprayed to park every night.

“We’ve had our vehicle smashed. We’ve been asked to move on. I’m living like a refugee in my own town.”

Food was a problem, because he could not eat anything exposed to chemicals. He survived on organic products, including yoghurt, fruit, dried seaweed, raw peanuts, peanut butter, canned lentils and chilli beans.

Unable to drink chemically treated tap water, he bought organic milk or walked into the bush to drink river water. However, rivers were often chemically tainted from private possum poisoning activities or historic 1080 operations.

He and his wife had to wash in creeks because chlorinated water made him ill.

Nowhere safe

Mr Boyes said they had a \$(edited out by Kevin for privacy) deposit from family to buy land, but couldn't find anywhere safe.

"We've been to everywhere we could think of, HousingCorp, everywhere, and I haven't been able to find a safe home where I won't get exposed to herbicide."

They had identified several Department of Conservation (Doc) areas in Grey, and sought permission to live there. Doc had refused because hunters were using it or it was to be sprayed.

He had approached every MP in the country, every Doc office in the South Island, and local mayors. He had also given them information on alternatives to spraying, such as using boiling water on roadside verges or putting goats on gorse-infested land.

Mr Boyes said he was the only chemically injured person he knew of until he went on line and found millions of others. They were called "canaries" after the canaries miners used to put into coalmines to check whether the air was safe to breathe.

He and his wife were aiming to set up an organic on-line shop, and were considering registering a political party to educate people on the dangers of poisons, and the alternatives.

Medical opinion

Two doctors have dealt with his case.

Department of Labour medical advisor, Bill Glass, conducted a telephone consultation with Mr Boyes last June.

Writing to Mr Boyes' Westport GP, Paul Cooper, Dr Glass said most of the few chemical sensitivity cases he had seen had gradually improved.

His advised patients to identify their chemical

triggers, then try to avoid them.

"If Kevin's condition can be accepted as an illness of some duration and he is allowed to continue the semi-isolated life that he currently has, then given time, I am sure things will improve," Dr Glass said.

In October last year, Dr Cooper wrote in support of Mr Boyes' application for land and/or housing which would meet his medical needs.

Dr Cooper said Mr Boyes had demonstrated a range of symptoms, consistent with multiple chemical sensitivity, over a number of years.

"These symptoms reflect an increasingly severe and widespread intolerance of petrochemicals."

Mr Boyes had determined he needed to be 3km away from herbicides, Dr Cooper said. He needed the same buffer zone to produce his own food and goats' milk, to avoid chemical illness from treated foods.

Doc responds

Buller Doc manager Bob Dickson said many Doc staff coastwide had been trying to help Mr Boyes.

"We have looked at opportunities outside of national parks, outside of reserves, outside of ecological areas. Unfortunately, he provides a very strict criteria, which is that he cannot be within 3km of any pesticide or herbicide operation..."

"Although we sympathise with his situation, I'm not prepared to devote any more resources to it."

Doc had no alternatives to using herbicides and pesticides, Mr Dickson said.

"We've got a massive investment in New Zealand's tourism stakes and we're working very hard to try and combat introduced pests for the protection of our indigenous species.

"We're losing the battle. We can't afford in any way to relax that."

Doc did not generally provide land for permanent occupation because it administered public land for the use of all New Zealanders. Mr Boyes might have to consider seeking private land, possibly outside Buller, he said.

Anyone able to help could contact him on 027 234 7771 or email todivi@yahoo.co.nz.