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Residents Allege Radioactive Waste in River Caused Cancer

March 13, 2012 By [Jennifer King](#)



Were it not for the nearby rivers, St. Louis probably wouldn't be the major metropolitan area that it is today. The Mississippi River flows past the city to the east, the Missouri-Mississippi confluence is to the north, the River Des Peres is toward the city's southern border and the Meramec River forms the county's southern border. Given the expanse of those rivers, you'd be forgiven if you didn't notice Coldwater Creek, a stream that heads north from St. Louis Airport and through northern St. Louis County before draining into the Missouri River.

But area residents say that little stream has caused big problems in their lives.

In late February, 13 of the creek's past and current neighbors filed a lawsuit in the [US District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri](#). In the suit, the plaintiffs allege that for years they were exposed to hazardous materials which were allowed to contaminate the creek, as well as the nearby air and soil. They are suing 15 corporations which were, in various ways, allegedly involved in the manufacturing, processing, storage, handling or disposal of this hazardous waste.

Serious Health Issues

The plaintiffs have suffered a variety of serious health issues over the years. The [list of illnesses mentioned in the complaint](#) is cringe-worthy:

- [Stage III Glioma](#) (brain cancer)
- Ovarian cancer and tumors
- Throat and neck cancer, including squamous cell carcinoma (cancer) of the throat
- [Hodgkin's Lymphoma](#)
- Cervical cancer
- Breast cancer
- Kidney cancer
- Prostate cancer
- [Ewing Sarcoma](#)
- Pancreatic cancer
- Gastrointestinal stromal tumor
- Lung cancer
- Colon cancer

The idea for a [toxic tort lawsuit](#) apparently gained traction after several plaintiffs who attended high school together in the late 1980s and early 1990s connected on Facebook. They started sharing details of their

illnesses, and realized it might not be a coincidence that so many of them were suffering from cancers and other health issues.

“By November, the classmates had collected anecdotal information on at least 57 cancers in people younger than 50 who grew up in the Coldwater Creek area,” according to an article about the lawsuit in [St. Louis Today](#). “Hundreds more reported experiencing other chronic illnesses and conditions including infertility.”

The plaintiffs allege the contamination dates back to the mid-1940s, when St. Louis companies were involved in developing World War II era nuclear bombs. Radioactive waste from the bombs was stored near the St. Louis airport and buried near the creek.

Attorney Christopher W. Byron



As the population grew, new housing developments sprang up near Coldwater Creek. Builders used contaminated soil to fill in some branches and other parts of the creek reportedly became residential drainage canals, according to [St. Louis Today](#). Kids, as they are apt to do, played in and near the creek. And when the heavy rains came—as they often do in this part of the country—the creek would sometimes flood into nearby yards and basements. The upshot: Residents were regularly and repeatedly exposed to the radioactive waste material that contaminated Coldwater Creek and everything surrounding it.

The plaintiffs are being represented by attorneys [Christopher W. Byron](#) and Eric J. Carlson of Byron Carlson Petri and Calb, LLC.

“We hope to help the victims of this contamination get justice for injuries we believe were perpetrated by callous and careless companies,” Byron says. The plaintiffs are asking for damages to pay for their medical costs, in addition to punitive damages, which are designed to punish the defendants for their wrongdoing.

Cancer Clusters

If you think you’ve heard of cases similar to the Coldwater Creek case, you probably have. The movies [Erin Brockovich](#) and [A Civil Action](#) both loosely portrayed real-life lawsuits involving groundwater contamination that sickened nearby residents.

These so-called “[cancer clusters](#)” aren’t uncommon. In the United States, it’s estimated that about 1,000 suspected cancer clusters are reported annually. To qualify as a cancer cluster, Centers for Disease Control looks at several factors, all of which must exist:

- The same type of cancer or the cancers must have the same root cause
- The cancer rate must be higher than average
- The cancer must occur in a defined group of people
- It must occur in a limited geographic area
- And it must occur in a specific period of time

Investigating a suspected cluster can take time—often years—and at this point the Coldwater Creek case is only a suspected cluster.

A [2011 Community Health Needs Assessment](#) conducted by the St. Louis County Health Department acknowledges the prevalence of cancer in the area, but stops short of identifying its cause:

The North County population [which includes residents living near Coldwater Creek] has a history of higher rates of breast cancer and prostate cancer, although these rates are similar to what one would expect for a population

with its characteristics. This population has characteristics similar to those for inner city St. Louis, driven by higher rates of obesity, lack of exercise, and smoking within some segments of the population. There are possibly some environmental issues within St. Louis County with legacy industries, but it is difficult to link pollutants from this source to any particular population.

Tagged as: [coldwater creek](#), [environmental law](#), [mass tort](#), [personal injury](#), [toxic tort](#)

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