

Snowflake MCS/EHS community

A rural area outside Snowflake, Arizona has become a haven for people with severe multiple chemical sensitivity and electrical sensitivity. Over 30 people with environmental illness live in specially built or modified homes on large lots. Fourteen homes are built adjacent to each other, while the rest are scattered over a larger area.



Keywords: Snowflake, Arizona, MCS, EHS, electrical sensitivity, environmental illness, community, housing

Introduction

Environmental illness (multiple chemical sensitivity, MCS and electrical hypersensitivity, EHS) is a growing problem. Most people have the less severe versions and are able to manage by not using the toxic personal care and laundry products and limit their exposures to wireless radiation. To family and friends they seem to live the normal lifestyle.

A few people progress to the more severe versions and have to make major lifestyle changes; sometimes they have to leave their homes and move to a less polluted area. As socializing with people using fragrances, pesticides, toxic laundry products and wireless gadgets is very difficult, people with severe environmental illness (EI) are often forced to live in isolation. In response, communities have been created in the Southwest United States and elsewhere.

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The Snowflake community was started in 1988 and is one of the oldest in the world. The picture above shows seven of the Snowflake EI houses.

An EI community is not a utopia, but it can be very liberating to be able to visit neighbors without getting sick and without constantly having to explain yourself (or suffer in silence). It can also be a comfort to be around other people who have had to go through the same process of no longer tolerating what most people think of as “normal life,” and often becoming an outcast. Perhaps our community is a bit like a veterans organization, since only a fellow soldier will understand what a posting in a conflict zone really means.

These are all concepts regular people have a hard time grasping, since they are not directly affected by common chemicals and electropollution.

We are simply trying to make the best out of a very difficult situation. This is similar to people who have to flee ethnic, political or religious persecution.

The EI community

Our community consists of all sorts of people from many backgrounds. We have people with professional degrees and people who worked in blue collar jobs. Most people had a successful career before they got sick, while a few got sick so early they never had a real job.



Members of the community celebrate the completion of a new home.

Some people are financially well off, while others struggle to live on a low Social Security income.

We have married couples and we have single households. We have fundamentalist Christians and we have atheists. We have people who are culturally liberal and folks who are culturally conservative. There are people who believe in conspiracy theories (very common in the rural West) and those who do not.

All of us moved here from somewhere else. Most came from big cities in other states. A few were even born in other countries.

The only thing we all have in common is a need for a healthier environment. Some people have chemical sensitivities, some have electrical sensitivities, some have both. The severity varies with the person. Many have other medical conditions, such as Lyme disease, Crohn's, lupus, post-polio, seizure disorders, asthma, photosensitivity, chronic fatigue, etc. Some people may also have PTSD as a result of the traumatic experience of getting sick with a little-understood and life-altering illness, and perhaps having to abandon their homes before they came here.

The Snowflake houses

Most of our houses are built from the ground up to be healthy, though a few are regular houses that were modified. Healthy materials, such as additive-free concrete, ceramic tile, glass, steel and aluminum are used extensively. Carpeting, plywood and other materials containing glues and synthetics are not used. Some of the houses are shielded against radiation from cell towers.

The construction methods have been developed locally over nearly three decades. Coyote House (www.eiwellspring.org/saferh/CoyoteHouse.htm) is a typical example.

Our building methods are different from what is generally considered "green" or "sustainable," since most of their materials are not really healthy, or are too costly. Recycled materials are often moldy or otherwise contaminated. Most of us do not tolerate the terpenes in wood.

Our houses reflect the financial means of the owners. Some are large and fancy, some are modest.

Other health features

Our special houses are the obvious difference that newcomers notice, but they are just a part of the whole picture. As our sensitivities vary, so do some of the methods we use to cope.

We drive older cars that have been detoxed so the fumes from the interior carpeting, panels, etc. do not make us sick. People who are electrically sensitive use older cars with less electronic radiation and some also made modifications to bring the radiation down further.

People use various methods to cope with ink fumes from books and magazines, such as using audio books or electronic book readers, offgassing papers or encapsulating them in various ways.

There are fewer personal care products in our bathrooms than in the typical American home and the brands will be unfamiliar to most people. The regular products simply make us sick.

Visiting stores is difficult for many of us. Some simply put up with the symptoms, while others are more severely affected and use a respirator, get help from store personnel or hire a shopper. Some stores are more difficult to access than others.



Some of the less-toxic household products used in MCS homes.

MCS and EHS are not allergies, but most of us also have allergies to pollen, mold, terpenes, etc. These allergies are often unusually severe, with little or no relief available from drugs. Even the desert is not free of these triggers, but it is better than most other climates.

Many of us have various food allergies, food intolerances, gluten intolerance, lactose intolerance and sensitivities to all sorts of food additives. This often necessitates a restricted diet that has to be cooked from scratch using organic ingredients.

The use of medication is a problem for some of us due to intolerance of the dyes, binders and fillers used, or to the medication itself. Some medications have to be used at a much lower dose than normally prescribed, since they are sometimes broken down slower in the bodies of people with MCS.

Even among the severely sensitive there is a variation in our sensitivities. Two of us may walk into the same store at the same time and one is affected by the air pollution within minutes, while it takes more than half an hour for the other. Then once outside in the clean air, one may recover within an hour while the other may take days to recover.

Living in our clean environment tends to improve people's health so we become more resilient over time, but it is rare that people actually get cured.

Why Snowflake?

The common reasons we move to Snowflake are:

- low air pollution
- low mold
- moderate pollen seasons
- low humidity
- low electropollution
- moderate four-season climate
- large lots are affordable
- local house-building experience
- occasional availability of housing
- established MCS/EHS community

There are drawbacks also, such as:

- no local MCS/EI physicians
- some people miss green landscapes
- high elevation (thin air)
- windy springtime
- occasional smell from distant pig farm
- occasional smoke from distant forest fires
- dust
- few specialty stores
- limited cultural activities

However, no place is perfect, and no place is for everyone. Some people used to big cities initially wrinkle their noses, but often grow to like the place. Almost all of us used to live in large cities.

The controversy

People have always been looked at suspiciously when having a little-understood illness. In the recent past that has happened to people with asthma, AIDS, sickle-cell anemia, endometriosis and other now-accepted diseases. When there are special interests actively opposing acceptance, as was the case with asbestos lung disease, and now with MCS and EHS, then acceptance is even slower.

Around 1990 the chemical industry realized that if MCS became accepted it would mean expensive lawsuits and disruption of their product lines. MCS was painted as an imagined illness and the physicians trying to help us were called quacks.

Scientific studies funded by industry tend to arrive at results that show no health effects from chemicals or wireless radiation. Meanwhile, scientists who do find a connection sometimes find their funding disappears and their integrity questioned.

This all echoes the playbook used by the tobacco industry and the asbestos industry that successfully delayed regulation by many decades. The asbestos industry even funded medical seminars about how asbestosis was supposedly a mental illness, just as the chemical industry have about environmental illness.

The denialists point to some studies that showed people with environmental sensitivities couldn't tell whether they were exposed or not if they were blinded. Those studies were usually done in offices that produced symptoms even before the tests started, making it really hard to tell the difference. It's like sitting in a

room with a pipe smoker and then having to tell whether there is also a cigar smoker there or not.

More research is needed to dispel the controversy, but it is difficult to get funding for controversial science and the industry has actively opposed such funding with the bogus claim that the issue is settled.

Media coverage

Our community has been visited by public TV stations from Europe and Asia, as well as NPR radio, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *High Country News* and others. We try to avoid the more sensationalistic media, but are not always successful. Some media have written about us without even visiting or interviewing any of us.

Allowing the media to visit is dicey. Environmental illness is a large and complicated subject — both the medical science and the way we cope with the illness.

Journalists tend to oversimplify by focusing on the most obvious, such as the houses we live in. Meanwhile, less obvious and more complicated things are rarely mentioned, such as our less-toxic low-radiation cars, and what it really means to routinely be denied the access and comforts other Americans take for granted. Some media tend to focus on the medical controversy, while some have been downright ignorant and disrespectful.

The media often refer to MCS and EHS as a sort of allergy. It has for decades been known that MCS and EHS are not based on the allergy mechanism and the symptoms are not all the same. Referring to them as “allergies” trivializes the severe symptoms people can have and gives the false impression that the illnesses are just inconveniences like allergies often are.

Having severe environmental illness is a life-altering experience that is very hard for outsiders to comprehend — even by people with milder environmental illness. When people and journalists do not understand, it is all too easy to see everything through a psychiatric lens — why don't these people simply go to a psychiatrist? Many of us have tried those treatments and they do not help. There are physicians who do treat environmental illnesses, and they are sometimes able to cure the illness, but many of us wasted our time and money on inappropriate treatments and got there too late.

We've seen journalists characterize us as “self-diagnosed” even though every person they met was diagnosed by a physician. We've seen articles portraying

people in ways hardly recognizable to those who know them. A journalist with an agenda can make even Mother Theresa look bad.

The movie

The 2017 documentary movie *The Sensitives* was partially filmed in Snowflake and features a member of our community. The movie was directed by Drew Xanthopoulos, who filmed here over a three-year period. Further details are available here: www.eiwellspring.org/Books/SensitivesReview.htm.

End of general interest section

This article was originally intended for sick people who were considering moving to Snowflake, but whenever we are mentioned in the media this article gets a lot of traffic. We've therefore added some general information up front for those people who wish to go beyond the sensationalism.

You can see a [photo tour](#) and additional articles about our community at www.eiwellspring.org/arizonalocal.html, where there are also articles about some of the other EI communities.

This website also has a collection of personal stories at www.eiwellspring.org/facesandstories.html.

The e-mail address of the community contact person is provided at the very end of this article.

The rest of this article provides information for people with MCS/EHS who are interested in the Snowflake area.

The Snowflake area

The town of Snowflake was first settled by Mormon pioneers. It is named after Mr. Snow and Mr. Flake. About half of the town population today are members of the Mormon church.

Most people with EI live in a rural neighborhood about eight miles east of Snowflake; others live further away. The rural area east of town is an eclectic mix of country folk, old hippies, EIs and survivalists. A large neighborhood of hippies is located a few miles east of the main EI neighborhood.

Navajo County stretches up to the Utah state line and is a thinly populated county, with a little over 100,000 inhabitants. The large Navajo and Apache Indian

reservations are located at each end of the county. The county seat is Holbrook, which also sees a lot of tourist traffic in the summer.

The main shopping town is Show Low to the south, that also serves a large area of vacation homes in the surrounding mountains. The smaller towns of Pinetop and Lakeside are a little more upscale.

Apache county starts about 18 miles east of Snowflake. Some community members live there. Apache county is poorer, more rural and less sophisticated than Navajo county.

The politics of Snowflake and the two counties is very conservative and pro-development.

There are hundreds of off-grid solar homes in the area. It is not seen as something that just green-minded people do. Land well beyond the electrical grid is inexpensive, attracting many kinds of people.

Climate

The EI neighborhood is located at 5800 ft (1800 meters) elevation in the high desert of Arizona. The area receives about 12 inches (300 mm) of rain a year, mostly during the summer monsoon.



Snowflake is located about a mile above sea level and has a four-season climate. The ground is rarely covered with snow for more than a day at a time.

The high elevation provides for a cooler climate than in the low deserts of southern Arizona. The summers are moderate, with daytime temperatures typically in the low 90s (low 30s centigrade). The low humidity makes higher temperatures more comfortable than they would be in a more humid climate.

The dry and thin air means the air does not hold the heat as well, so the temperature varies greatly between night and day, especially during spring and fall. It is not uncommon to have a fall day with 28°F (−2°C) at sunrise and 68°F (20°C) in the afternoon. Most homes do not have air conditioning; instead people cool their houses with open windows at night. People living in travel trailers may need air conditioning during summer days.

The winter nights are cold, often in the teens (−20°C), but most days are very sunny and usually in the forties (5–10°C) in the afternoon. Snow falls occasionally, but rarely stays for more than a day or two. The heating season is six to seven months, depending on how well the house is built.

It is a windy climate. The wind blows most days in April and May, where it can be quite annoying, with typical afternoon wind gusts of 20 to 30 mph, sometimes more. The wind can blow dust into the air, though we do not get real dust storms here.

The dry climate may take some time to get used to. Newcomers sometimes have nosebleeds the first months.

Air quality

The air quality is exceptionally good most of the year, much better than any city or suburb. There are no major sources of air pollution within ten miles of the neighborhood, and only a few within a hundred miles.

The nearby Petrified Forest National Park is listed as a Class 1 (most protected) area in the Clean Air Act, which encourages low air pollution levels in the general area.

The larger area has some pollution sources, though their impact is small compared to most other areas in the United States.

Three coal fired power plants operate in the region. One is at Joseph City, about 20 miles to the northwest. Two other plants are about 35 miles to the east. The prevailing winds are from the southwest and west; it is very rare that pollution is carried towards the MCS neighborhood. It has never been a problem.

A smaller biomass power plant is located about fifteen miles to the west of the EI neighborhood. It burns wood chips that are left over from tree cutting in the White Mountain region. Considered a waste product, the wood would otherwise be burned in big slash piles.

A large pig farm is located ten miles north of Snowflake. The stench of manure can sometimes be smelled 15 miles away, when directly downwind and after a rain.

The season for forest fires in the Southwest is during the months of May and June, before the monsoon. Forest fires can send smoke to the area from forests to the south and west. Most years, there are days when some people stay inside with closed windows to avoid the smoke from distant forest fires. However, it was only during the large 2002 Rodeo-Chediski fire (upwind and only 30 miles away) that several people moved away for a few days to escape the smoke.

The Forest Service does prescribed burnings in the forests south of Snowflake every spring and fall to prevent the big out-of-control forest fires. Even though the forests are at least thirty miles away, the smoke can be bothersome when carried up by the wind.

Smoke from forest fires can travel hundreds of miles and is an issue throughout the western United States.



Weeds along county roads are mowed instead of sprayed with herbicides.

The Arizona Department of Transportation sprays herbicides along highway 77 and Interstate multiple times a year. All county roads are mowed, none are sprayed.

The climate is too dry for large-scale farming. Open land is used for free-range cattle instead. There is some small-scale irrigation farming around the town of Snowflake.

There are no mines in the area. Some years ago potash mines were considered for the area around Petrified Forest, but those plans have been abandoned.

Oil companies have drilled for oil and gas in the area and didn't find anything. The nearest gas wells are 35 miles to the east, with a few oil wells 30 miles to the north.

The above list of pollution sources may seem scary to some, but it is really very little as they are spread out over an enormous area. Try to consider all the many smaller sources of pollution in a more populated area, perhaps within just 10 miles from your present home — how many houses with wood stoves or fireplaces, how many lawns that are sprayed, how many clothes dryers, gas stations, dry cleaners, body shops, cars, trucks, etc. It all adds up, even if they may not seem as ominous as a single smokestack 20 miles away.

Vegetation, mold and pollen

The climate is dry high desert, with little vegetation. Some areas have dense stands of juniper bushes while the rest is mostly native grasses. The juniper pollen season in March is bothersome to many, and there are some flower and grass pollens in August-September.

On hot days the junipers evaporate terpenes that bother some people. They smell similar to wood smoke or remote brush fires. Most of the EI houses are built in areas with few junipers to avoid these problems.

The dry climate inhibits mold growth, though any house can have mold inside it due to moisture from cooking, bathing, roof leaks, etc. There are dormant molds in the soil, which can become activated by the monsoon and be bothersome. The fungus causing valley fever does not live in Northern Arizona.

The mold and pollen levels are generally much lower than they are in more humid climates.

Critters

The cold winters and dry climate limits the number of critters. Snakes and scorpions exist here, but are rarely seen. They prefer the lower elevations where they are much more common. There is enough moisture during the summer monsoon to support flies, while mosquitoes are rare. There are some spiders in the area, including a small version of the tarantula. The centipede is a many-legged creature about two inches long with a nasty bite, which must be avoided, however.

The only bugs that businesses may spray pesticides for are ants and centipedes. Many businesses, including the post office, do spray on a schedule. A few towns in the general area do have mosquitoes and use aerial sprayings (St. Johns, Springerville), but they are 30-50 miles away and few of us ever need to go there.

Dust mites and other microscopic critters that take moisture from the air, have difficulty living in our dry climate.

Electropollution

The levels of electropollution are generally low in the area. The exception is the town of Holbrook, which has five large transmission towers and measured radio frequency levels well above anywhere else in the area.

The town of Snowflake presently has rather low readings. There are two cell towers in the town itself and towers some miles to the north, east and south of town. None of the towers are close to the health food store or grocery stores.

The EI neighborhood is eight miles east of Snowflake. The nearest tower is five miles from the neighborhood. Only the off-grid areas have greater distances to towers.

Wireless mesh smart meters were installed in the area in October 2013. Thanks to local activists, the electrical company allows anyone to opt out.

The electropollution from neighbors is low in the rural areas, as most parcels are zoned for 20 acres per house.

Two 500 kilovolt power lines cross the area. People are advised not to live within a mile of them.

The table shows typical 2018 ambient daytime levels for the central EI-neighborhood as well as a more remote area with no grid power and very few homes. The nighttime RF levels are much lower.

	EI neighborhood	Off-grid area
Ground currents	0.01 milligauss	0.001 milligauss
Radio frequency	10 uW/m ²	1 uW/m ²
Dirty electricity	20 Graham-Stetzer units	(no grid)

The actual values can vary dramatically with the specific house site and can be greatly influenced by the neighbors, power lines, etc. Any electrical problems inside a house can dramatically raise the levels.

If you are comparing these numbers with your own, or other sources, make sure to use the same units. Several common units for radio frequencies look much alike. We use the microwatt-per-square-meter unit. A microwatt is 1/1000th of a milliwatt, which is commonly used in areas with higher radiation levels.

For comparison with other scales:

- 1 uW/m² = 0.001 mW/m²
- 1 uW/m² = 0.0000001 mW/cm²
- 1 uW/m² = 0.0001 uW/cm²
- 1 uW/m² = 0.04 V/m
- 1 uW/m² = -51 dBm
- 0.01 milligauss = 1 nanoTesla

The listed numbers are all low compared to what is typically found in towns, suburbs and cities in the United States.

The radiation level in American towns is often in the 100 to 1000 uW/m² range, while densely populated areas can exceed 10,000 uW/m² (as of 2017).

Noise

The rural areas have some of the lowest noise levels in the United States, which was documented by a community study in 2010 as well as by other studies.

The background noise level in the central EI community was 22 decibels (dBA) while the more remote areas were even lower.

People who visit often comment on how quiet the area is.

Water

Most houses have their own well, which is typically 300 to 400 ft (100–130 m) deep. A well costs about \$15,000 so some people have chosen to have a storage tank and have water delivered by a truck, or they haul it themselves.

The well water is pristine and has not been polluted by pesticides or other chemicals.

There are no mining, major agriculture, industry or oil/gas operations in the area, or on the ground-water path from the mountains, so the water should continue to be unpolluted.

The ground water has a naturally high mineral content, especially iron, but there is no toxic arsenic. Environmentally sensitive people need to filter the water with reverse-osmosis (RO) before drinking it. Most EI houses have RO systems, while some buy RO-filtered water from machines in town (bring your own one-gallon glass bottles).

Most homes use whole-house water softeners, while a few also had to install whole-house iron filters.

There are areas where the mineral content is so high the water is not usable at all, particularly the area east and north of Holbrook.

There are no looming water shortages in this area, unlike many other parts of the Southwest.

Local media

There are six local FM radio stations, and National Public Radio can be received with a good antenna. There is a community TV station in Show Low, but there is no reception in Snowflake. The only TV available is via satellite receivers.

Snowflake is served by the Silver Creek Herald newspaper, though the regional White Mountain Independent has much better coverage.

Communication

There are telephone landlines in most areas. Many of the off-grid areas do not have landlines. Cell phone and 3G/4G service now reaches all areas.

The telephone company offers wired DSL internet service in most areas with telephone service, but not all.

Some people use the computers at the public library in Snowflake or at the community college.

The Postal Service doesn't deliver mail to individual homes on unpaved roads. People living in these areas will have to pick up their mail from a post office box in town, or a rural mailbox on a paved road. People commonly gather their mail a couple of times a week.

UPS and FedEx deliver to all addresses.

Recreation

Various types of outdoor recreation is available. The area south of Snowflake offers many hiking trails, lakes to boat on and fish in, and a ski resort during the winter months. There are also some good hiking areas along Silver Creek canyon north of Snowflake.

The mountains south of Snowflake can provide a respite from the summer heat and for people longing to see forests and lakes instead of the desert.

There are outdoor festivals of various kinds in the different little towns throughout summer. The annual festival in Snowflake is Pioneer Days in late July, that includes a parade well worth seeing.

Perhaps the largest festival in the area is held the Saturday before Thanksgiving in Winslow.

There are various forms of indoor live entertainment, such as the White Mountain Symphony Orchestra, bands playing at the Hon-Dah casino and the frequent Snowflake High School plays. Very few of us can attend indoor events, but they may be of interest to healthy family members.

Shopping

The Snowflake area has a Walmart, two grocery stores, and various businesses offering photocopies, auto repair, hardware, etc. The town of Show Low has an assortment of big-box stores.

A wide variety of fresh and boxed organic foods are available from a health food store in Snowflake. Most of the grocery stores also carry some organic foods.

Three large health food supermarkets are available two hours away in Flagstaff, which also has more specialty stores.

Additional organic produce, etc. is available by mail order from Phoenix at reasonable cost, and through the Azure co-op which delivers monthly.

Medical care

There are no environmental physicians in the region. The closest ones are in Santa Fe and Los Alamos (New Mexico) and Benson east of Tucson.

There is a naturopath, Dr. Nichols, NMD, who will work with us, but cannot offer much EI-specific assistance. He does not take Medicare or any other insurance, but his fees are lower than the MDs in town. His clinic is fragrance free and he will come to your home, if necessary.

There used to be two “conventional” clinics in Snowflake that were friendly to us, but one closed and the other got new management and made other changes, and is no longer helpful to us. Some now go to a friendly MD in Show Low, though the clinic is not safe to be in.

There are various specialist physicians in the area. There are some travelling specialist physicians who come to the area a few times a month. However, people sometimes have to travel to Phoenix, Tucson or Flagstaff for specialists.

The hospital is in Show Low. There have been some contacts with the EI community, and the policy is that the staff does not use fragrances. The air quality in the patient rooms is excellent. The electropollution is very high, however. There are transmitters on the roof and next door. Each patient room has a staff-used computer as well as other electronics. The staff has been very accommodating when we had to go there.

The hospital performs various types of surgery, though some complicated surgeries are referred to Phoenix.

One Snowflake dentist, Dr. Sierra, has a good understanding of MCS/EHS access issues and a very safe clinic. He will accommodate if advised in advance.

There is otherwise little alternative health care available in the area. Some people go to Flagstaff. The towns of Prescott and Sedona have world-class offerings, but they are far away for a day trip.

Social services

The social services available from public sources are very rudimentary compared to what is available in more liberal states.

We do have people who are too sick to drive themselves, go shopping or other chores. They hire local people to help and pay out of their own pocket. Some of the community members make a little extra income that way, while more involved help is provided by regular people who live in the area. The degree to which helpers are willing to refrain from using toxic personal care and laundry products varies. Don't expect them to fully clean up their lifestyle.

Education

The Arizona public schools generally rank low compared to other states, which is typical for the Sunbelt. There is a private school in Snowflake (George Washington Academy), and multiple private schools in the Show Low area, including a Montessori school.

We do not know whether any of the schools will accommodate a child with special environmental needs. We have not had any school-age children in our community for well over a decade and they were all home-schooled.

There is a small community college with branches in Show Low, Holbrook and Snowflake, that is part of the Northland Pioneer system. The nearest university is Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, that cooperates with the Northland Pioneer system.

Employment

Employment opportunities around Snowflake are very limited. A major employer in the area is the Navajo county administration in Holbrook. Healthy people moving here with a sick family member have found employment, but it is not easy and may require a major pay cut, though the cost of living is lower than in a city.

Social life

The EI community consists of all sorts of people from many backgrounds. Some keep to themselves while others join in the opportunities for social interaction with the rest of the community. Most major holidays are celebrated, as well as several birthdays each year.

As the community has grown, it is no longer feasible to host parties for the whole community, as was the norm until recent years.

Like many communities, people help each other in need, as long as it is appropriate and balanced. People who need ongoing help hire people for shopping and other services.

The EI community enjoys good relations with the nearby hippie community, consisting of about fifty households. Many of them do organic gardening and usually use less-toxic personal care products. The two communities have joined forces opposing developers a few times.



Three community members perform a skit during a community celebration.

Doctors, scientists and others with an interest in MCS/EHS and related issues have occasionally visited the community.

Some people use a local senior center, which makes good efforts to be less toxic.

Fitting in

This is a community for people with *both* MCS and EHS. Most have both illnesses, but some have only one. If you are lucky enough to have only one of these illnesses, you may consider embracing both lifestyles if you wish to participate in the social life. If you use fragrant or toxic products daily, it is not possible for you to just take a shower and be clean enough to visit someone with MCS.

Our community has been burdened a few times with newcomers who were prone to conflicts. Some people with environmental illness tend to be angry at the world and create conflict with their neighbors no matter where they go. If this is you, this community will not make your world any more pleasant. No place will.

Activism

We have a couple of people who do activist work on an ongoing basis to promote the civil rights of people with environmental disabilities. Other community members have joined in from time to time, especially when there was a local threat such as when smart meters were rolled out.

Activist work is particularly difficult to do with our disabilities and reduced income. The halls of power are also far away from Snowflake.

Housing

There are both rental houses and privately owned homes in the EI community. Most houses are purpose-built by contractors who are experienced in MCS/EHS housing, though the owner is usually involved on a daily basis. Several owners camped in tents, cars or trailers while their houses were built.

The zoning in most rural areas requires a minimum of 20 acres (8 hectares) for each home, ensuring that the area stays rural. Land is affordable, making such large lots economical. There is no communally owned land.

Most of the MCS/EHS homes are connected to the electrical grid, but several are in off-grid areas and powered by solar panels.

Several homes have been built for around \$175,000 – \$225,000, everything included. Off-grid solar houses can be cheaper, while fancier homes can cost much more. The owner's project management skills can also greatly impact the total cost.

There are sometimes houses for rent or sale. The availability varies and there isn't any official waiting list (except for the state-funded rental houses). Some people get a local contact to stay informed; some have simply camped in the area for months in order to secure a rental.



The four rental houses built by the state of Arizona.

The State of Arizona built four specially designed, less-toxic/low-EMF houses in the neighborhood, which are rented to people with environmental illness who also have a low income. Pictures and more information about the state rental houses are available here: www.eiwellspring.org/multiunit/AZPublicHousingProject.htm.

The waiting list is very long, but consider signing up anyway. You may be very glad you did when you get to the top. It also helps us document the need for more housing.

Covenants

There are no general EI covenants restricting what people can do. The area was developed piecemeal and not from one subdivided tract, making it very difficult to install a covenant.

A covenant does not seem necessary since the houses are so far apart. A restrictive covenant would also make financing a house much more difficult, and a court may throw it out anyway if someone challenges it.

A few people have put covenants on land they subdivided themselves. The rental houses have their own rules, because they are so close together.

There is a Land Use/Community Plan in effect for the area, that discourages toxic developments and toxic businesses. It was enacted in 2006 after extensive community meetings. The plan was signed by two county officials, but it has only weak legal standing.

Do people get well from moving to Snowflake?

Most people who move here see some improvement in their overall health, but living here is not a magic cure.

We've had several people live here for a few years who recovered enough that they were able to move back to where they came from and live there in a modified house.

It is rare that people get fully cured, but most see some improvements. Most of us become better at tolerating the "regular" world for a short time, as long as we can go back to our safe houses and recover from the exposures.

People with severe allergies tend to feel much better here, since they may not be allergic to any of the vegetation. After some years they may become allergic to the desert vegetation, though the levels of pollen, mold and terpenes are low compared to a wetter climate.

The high elevation is a problem for some people. Some are able to adjust to the thinner air after some weeks, but others are not and should not live here.

Some newcomers have never lived in a less-toxic place before and are so overloaded with daily exposures that they are not aware of everything that affects them. They may even use some toxic personal care products they believe are not harming them. After living here for some weeks or months, they tend to "unmask" where they find out the true level of their sensitivities. This can seem like they are getting worse, but is simply a process where they need to change or eliminate foods, clothing items, laundry products and personal care products that they are finally now able to see are a problem. This is a scary process, but necessary to feel better than when they arrived. A few do not succeed and come to believe that somehow living here made them worse.

Visiting the Snowflake community

We get about ten visitors a year who come to see if this is a place for them to move to. Some come back later, a few never leave.

People need to arrive with their own transportation. There is no public transportation and the distances are too great for walking.

Be aware that people here may be much more sensitive than yourself. Most of us avoid cell phones and when we come home from town most of us take a shower and put on clean clothes. While in town, our hair and clothes will pick up fragrances and other contaminants, which will have to be removed before we can start feeling better again.

We know that visitors rarely arrive really “clean,” especially people who have not lived around other sensitive people, so please do not be offended if you are not invited inside a house or you are politely offered a shower and some clean clothes to borrow during your visit. We often cannot smell the clothes we wear ourselves, but they can make us and others sick just as well. You may feel better yourself!

Visitors are also expected to fully turn off their cell phones, chargers and other electronics. Making them silent is not enough — they must be fully off, so they cannot receive calls in any way. If you feel you need to make a call using a cell phone, please do not do it inside anyone’s house, but go outside at least fifty feet (15 meters) from the house.

The best time to visit is summer and fall. Avoid the winter and the month of April, when the storms roll through.

Temporary lodging

The best less-toxic commercial lodging is La Posada in Winslow (one hour away), that is built and maintained with natural materials and generally avoids fragrances, pesticides and toxic cleaners.

Campers like Fool Hollow Lake in Show Low and Lyman Lake State Park south of St. Johns. Dispersed camping is possible on the Lyman Lake beach, but there is a cell tower close by. Some visitors have slept in their car or travel trailer in someone’s driveway, though such lodging must be arranged privately before arriving.

We have people camping here most summers. The season is May through October; the rest of the year is too cold for camping.

Community contact

You can send an e-mail to our community contact on snowflakeX@eiwellspring.org (type in the e-mail address without the X, this reduces the amount of spam e-mails).

More information

See the Arizona web page of The EI Wellspring (www.eiwellspring.org/arizonalocal.html) for additional information about Snowflake and other Arizona MCS/EHS communities.

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