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LOCAL OPINION

Aerial spraying a symptom of bad forest policies

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A Nov. 30 Register-Guard guest viewpoint, "Aerial pesticide use well regulated in Oregon," debates spray safety zones around human habitation and water supplies. Larger issues raised by the specter of helicopters spraying lethal poisons over forest watersheds go unaddressed.

The word "pesticides" is a politically polite name for poisons. Common poisons used in industrial tree farming are insecticides to kill insects, including pollinators such as bees; rodenticides to kill forest food chain animals such as rabbits and mountain beaver; salmon-lethal fungicides to kill blights like Swiss needle cast, spread by planting Douglas fir monocultures, and herbicides to kill all vegetation except conifer trees.

Herbicides are non-selective, killing vegetation according to concentration, not species. Trees and grasses, with wider leaves, absorb more poison than needle-like conifer leaves. I've seen conifers killed by aerial herbicide spraying when the toxic soup was too "hot."

The magnitude of statewide forest poisoning is huge. In the 1990s, using then-available Department of Forestry records, my forestry associates tallied forest chemical use in Lane County. Lane has about 800,000 acres of private forests, mostly industrially owned. They found nearly 9 percent of this forest ownership (70,000 acres) being poisoned annually with an estimated 40 tons of concentrates added to far greater volumes of "inert" mixers.

At this scale, contamination to public waters, wildlife, fisheries, and human communities from continual aerial spraying becomes statistically unavoidable.

The promoters of aerial spraying present it as an all-or-nothing scenario: Tree farms will perish, they say.

Most unbiased foresters will admit there are many ways to regrow trees without aerial spraying. Forest workers can release conifers from competition with surrounding vegetation using backpack herbicide sprayers with far more precision and less collateral damage than helicopters.

Considering industrial clearcutting's scale, aerial spraying may be cheaper and quicker, but hand spraying near fish streams, domestic water sources and adjacent properties is effective and more socially responsible.

Some successful tree farmers decry poisons completely, relying instead on quickly replanting sturdy, well-placed seedlings after clearcut harvesting, then scalping or covering around the young trees where needed. Others use selection harvest techniques, such as thinning or small patch cuts, relying on residual forest cover to help protect young trees from undesirable vegetative blooms.

Although there are many non-chemical ways to practice forestry, big corporations use their clout to downplay the toxicity of the poisons they market and enforce their myth that regrowing trees requires chemicals.

Oregon's archaic Forest Practices Act doesn't restrict harvest rates or how old trees have to be at final harvest. This allows trees to be routinely grown and harvested at less than 40 years of age, then replanting occurs. Poisons and fertilizers are used in ever increasing quantities to economically optimize and bolster this unnatural rush.

When trees are grown older — say, to 60 years — vegetative competition is gradually and naturally overcome as the aggressive, spear-shaped conifers rise up to claim the site. There is also a significant gain in harvest volume by growing older trees, with 60-year-old stands producing twice the log volume per acre as stands harvested at 40. Delivering more timber volume from fewer acres reduces chemical dependence.

Federal forest managers regrow trees without poisons to at least 60 years before final harvest, allowing time for natural processes to foster young trees and produce higher quality timber. Our federal forests remain a testimony as to how the world's greatest native conifer forests thrived without chemicals in spite of setbacks from fires and storms.

In the early 1970s, when I began cruising timber, most stands considered harvestable were over 75 years old. Grown without chemicals, the older timber supported more labor to produce the finest lumber and plywood.

Today, the global real estate investment trusts buying up Oregon's forestlands are committed to growing money, not high-quality timber. Past 35 years of tree age, money grows faster, consequently trees are often harvested before 40. Continuing this short rotation fiber farming requires increasing volumes of poisons and supposedly "harmless" fertilizers, whose run-off feeds toxic algae blooms in our streams and lakes.

In spite of decreasing forest quality and collateral damage to public water and wildlife from toxic chemicals, Oregon rewards global forest investors with hundreds of millions of dollars in unearned annual property and harvest tax subsidies. Many of us are affected by this downward forestry spiral, if only by paying higher property taxes to make up for subsidy shortfalls. These issues deserve more discussion and rectification than focusing simply on aerial spray buffers.

Perhaps the most important issue aerial spraying raises: Who controls our state's forest practices and taxation policies, Oregon's citizens or Wall Street?

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