

The Register-Guard

OPINION HOME

EDITORIAL

Shine light on forest sprays

State law provides access to too little information

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The Triangle Lake area has become a battleground in the half-century-long conflict over the use of herbicides on Oregon’s private forest lands. The Triangle Lake case has brought to light one aspect of the conflict that demands legislative attention: Information about the quantities and types of herbicides being used is inexcusably hard to obtain.

Beyond Toxics, a Eugene environmental organization, released an exhaustive report last month documenting a steep increase in the volume of herbicides applied to private forest lands in the Triangle Lake area over a three-year period ending in 2011. The wealth of detail in the report was made possible only because people in the area, concerned about the health effects of chemical exposure, asked the Oregon Health Authority to investigate. The records of herbicide applications were obtained from the health authority, not from the state Department of Forestry.

Landowners must notify the Department for Forestry of their plans to apply herbicides.

The notifications list which chemicals might be used, but not which ones will actually be used, during a certain period, usually 12 months. These notifications are not subject to review and do not require the department's approval.

Landowners must maintain records of their actual pesticide applications, but these documents remain in private hands and are made available to the forestry department only at the request of the state forester. Were it not for the health authority's investigation, Triangle Lake residents would have only a dim idea of the types and quantities of herbicides that had been sprayed in their area.

The information vacuum is illustrated by a case in Gold Beach, where two dozen residents complained of headaches, blurred vision, joint pain and other problems after an aerial application of herbicides on nearby forest land in October. Residents have petitioned the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and other federal agencies for an investigation. As in Triangle Lake, the nature of the residents' exposure, if any, will become known only if an agency other than the Department of Forestry gets its hands on the records. Meanwhile, doctors are in the dark about how residents' health complaints should be treated.

The absence of information is a deficiency of the Oregon Forest Practices Act, which provides no process for public or agency review of herbicide application plans, allows herbicide application records to remain private and permits the private records to be destroyed after three years. Washington state's counterpart to the Forest Practices Act is stronger in all these respects.

Other provisions of Oregon's law relating to forest applications of herbicides are also weaker than Washington's — notably its protections for streams, wetlands, groundwater and adjacent properties. Oregon, for instance, requires aerial spray applicators to observe a 60-foot buffer zone along fish-bearing streams, while Washington requires buffers of 100 to 150 feet. Oregon, unlike Washington, requires no buffer at all along non-fish-bearing or intermittent streams. The risk that fish, wildlife and humans will be exposed is magnified as a result.

The Legislature should address these weaknesses, using Washington's law as a minimum standard. As long as herbicides are used as a tool on private forest lands, protections will be needed — and people will need access to information allowing

them to assess the real or potential effects on the environment and their health.

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peakchoicedotorg • 2 days ago

"These sprays, dusts, and aerosols are now applied almost universally to farms, gardens, forests, and homes -- nonselective chemicals that have the power to kill every insect, the "good" and the "bad," to still the song of birds and the leaping of fish in the streams, to coat the leaves with a deadly film, and to linger on in soil -- all this though the intended target may be only a few weeds or insects. Can anyone believe it is possible to lay down such a barrage of poisons on the surface of the earth without making it unfit for all life? They should not be called "insecticides," but "biocides." Along with the possibility of the extinction of mankind by nuclear war, the central problem of our age has therefore become the contamination of man's total environment with such substances of incredible potential for harm -- substances that accumulate in the tissues of plants and animals and even penetrate the germ cells to shatter or alter the very material of heredity upon which the shape of the future depends.

-- Rachel Carson, "Silent Spring," p. 18

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What is lacking in herbicide and pesticide use on private lands is information at all levels, starting with the hydrology of movement of those chemicals into streams, lakes, and drinking water aquifers, the quantity of leachates reaching streams and their levels, both intermittent and average; the effects of those chemicals both qualitatively and quantitatively on organisms, especially phytoplankton, tiny plants at the bottom of the food chain for fish, and the effects of hormone mimicking and endocrine disruptive chemicals like atrazine, which due to aerial spraying is found in all our streams.

We need an epidemiology of the toxic effects of aerial spraying by commercial growers, but with a three year limit on holding records, we will never get one, unless we remove that limit NOW, and make the State Department of Forestry the official registry of pesticide and herbicide use

HERBICIDES USE.

There has to be far more research on stream biota, from fish downward. I think most old-timers are aware that the fishing in Oregon's coastal waters, which used to be excellent, now stinks for all species. That fishery is worth hundreds of millions of dollars yearly to the economy. What's wrong with our state? Are they completely sold out to Weyerhaeuser? The large land holding cartels in Oregon pay little in property or severance taxes in Oregon (Kitzahaber Ok'd the tax relief bill) yet provide a diminishing number of forest and mill jobs locally, while shipping raw logs to China like there were no tomorrow. Shouldn't they pay their taxes like all other good citizens? At least they could fund the research into chemical sprays that is drastically needed starting NOW.

Talk to your state reps and get the big landholding companies to start paying their fair share. They can't move their trees to Texas in retaliation. And talk to your US representatives about the Republican strangulation of basic research, which once led this nation to world domination is science, but now is letting China, India, and Korea eat our lunch. And for heaven's sake, learn who your enemies are! They aren't in the field of science.

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Outsider77 · 2 days ago

Sadly, it does not matter whether the recommendations of this editorial are adopted. Irrational fear fuels the movement against herbicides. That fear will only be satisfied when application of all herbicides is stopped.

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peakchoicedotorg → Outsider77 · 2 days ago

Cancer treatment is good for economic growth, but it's not a good thing otherwise.

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coastrange → Outsider77 · 2 days ago

Yes there are some people who want all herbicides stopped but there are many more who want regulations that balance the benefit with the risk. Regulations like those in Washington seem very reasonable and should be adopted in Oregon.

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jjp58 → Outsider77 · 2 days ago

Outrageously poor judgement on your part! Without knowledge of what herbicides and pesticides do, you choose to automatically defend their use. They are poisons, Outsider, and they have adverse and toxic effects not only on people, but on economically important plants and animals. Without research, we know very little. And that goes double for you, on this subject. Read up a little.

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Outsider77 → jjp58 · 2 days ago

It is far from obvious that the benefits of herbicides are outweighed by the risks.