

On sprays, transparency should trump profit

I am writing in support of Senate Bill 613, a simple law that would require accurate records, accountability and access to information concerning poisons used in forestry applications. I can speak with authority about this based on my experience as Siuslaw National Forest supervisor from 1992 to 1999, and as deputy chief of the U.S. Forest Service after leaving Oregon in 1999.

The federal government ceased using forest herbicides in Oregon just before my arrival after notoriously losing a landmark lawsuit over human health issues associated with miscarriages and birth defects. We had to figure out a way forward without herbicides in our toolkit.

The outcome is instructive to today's protracted struggle to ensure human health in the face of corporate greed.

Herbicides long have been in use to kill leafy vegetation — think Agent Orange in Vietnam — and there is no longer any doubt that they are harmful to humans and the environment. The military pays disability claims to veterans exposed to these chemicals while in service to our country.

Why are herbicides used in Oregon's forests? To kill broadleaf vegetation, particularly red alder, that competes with conifer trees planted after clear-cutting.

The herbicides do not affect trees with needles. It's said that nature abhors a vacuum, and denuded forest areas are colonized quickly by plants that vie for sunlight and moisture with planted conifer seedlings. Once the nuisance broadleaf trees are killed by herbicides, these seedlings quickly dominate the clear-cut area.

Timing is everything. With the help of dedicated researchers, we learned that cutting down red alder once by hand immediately after its burst of growth in early summer meant that it had to re-grow with reduced strength. Once given this competitive edge, conifer seedlings simply outgrew red alder, and the success of the conifer plantation was secure.

Another thing. This issue is somewhat unique in its relation to the clear-cutting of large forest areas. Herbicides generally are not used with selective timber harvests.

An emerging contrast continues to be in evidence throughout Oregon today — clear-cutting in your national forests has been curtailed dramatically and herbicide use has stopped. On Oregon state forests and private industrial timberlands, both clear-cutting and herbicide use are still common practices.

SB 613 pursues a logical goal: Give citizens whose health is at risk the simple privilege of knowing what the heck is going on in their neighborhood. It seems utterly reasonable to me.

Yet guardians of the status quo will oppose this measure strongly. It's mostly about money; it is not about herbicides being the only effective treatment.

Hand cutting works. Yes, it is more costly, but it also creates jobs. Hand cutting decreases profits, but it still allows for a handsome financial return.



How will you end up at SELCO?
Anne came to SELCO because she wanted quick, friendly service and great rates on car loans and insurance.



But the real issue here is a regard for human health in the face of documented evidence that these herbicides cause serious illness. SB 613 does not even ask for a cessation of herbicide use to improve tree growth.

SB 613 asks for daylight.

People living in and near forested lands have a basic right to know what is being sprayed, when, and by whom. In light of the fact that there is no legitimate need to use herbicides other than mere profits, I think it's time the state of Oregon acted on behalf of those affected by poisons in their environment.

Jim Furnish of Rockville, Md., is a former supervisor on the Siuslaw National Forest and former deputy chief of the U.S. Forest Service.