

Agency: Scores of youths exposed to toxins

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A new report by the Eugene-based Oregon Toxics Alliance cites 56 suspected cases of children being exposed to pesticides at Oregon schools, bus stops, play fields and child care facilities since 1990, including a handful in Lane County.

And that's only the tip of the iceberg, said Lisa Arkin, the alliance's executive director.

"What I'd like to stress is we believe this is an under-representation of the actual scope of the problem," said Arkin, whose organization works to protect human and environmental health. "It's difficult to get people to report a suspected pesticide incident, and much of the medical literature also states that it's unusual for doctors to even realize they are required to report that to a state agency."

In some cases, she added, people simply don't make the link between symptoms and possible exposure to pesticides.

Arkin, a member of a work group convened by the state Legislature to draft legislation regarding pesticides at schools, said the findings proved more alarming than she anticipated.

"I believe we uncovered some very egregious cases where children were unnecessarily exposed to very toxic pesticides," she said.

At least two of the incidents were classroom lessons gone awry. At Lebanon High School a year ago, for example, at least one student in an agricultural science class was sprayed with a chemical component of Agent Orange and experienced skin rashes; the teacher, who lacked a pesticide applicator license, was cited.

Other incidents of suspected exposure resulted from nearby spraying. In April 2007, the Linnton Community Center day care and after-school program in Portland was evacuated after pesticides reportedly drifted onto the grounds, with several children requiring hospital treatment for rashes, coughing and breathing problems.

In 2004, a Junction City School District bus driver reported smelling odors and seeing planes spraying nearby, causing children at the bus stop to cough and yell to get inside. And in 2005, grass-seed herbicide reportedly drifted onto the grounds of Coburg Elementary School.

In the most serious case, authorities investigated the sudden death in 2006 of a 5-year-old at a Eugene home day care facility 13 days after insecticide was applied at the site, but found no conclusive link, Arkin said.

The findings, she said, underscore the necessity for legislation.

In a meeting today, the group — which includes representatives from the timber, farming and commercial chemical interests; educational organizations; environmental groups; and the Oregon Department of Transportation, among others — will review a draft that would require school districts to adopt “integrated pest management” plans by 2012. Such plans provide a framework in which agencies first try the most benign, least toxic solution, ramping it up gradually and only if necessary.

“So for instance, first you start by eliminating the way the pest is getting into the building, so you caulk, or put down screens, make sure the pantry is clean,” Arkin explained. From there, the next step might be traps, then a nontoxic solution such as boric acid.

The Eugene School District’s pest management plan is one of the best in the state, she noted. But chemical use in many other districts remains “rampant,” she said, despite growing evidence of heightened risks from pesticides to children’s neurological, respiratory, reproductive, immune and endocrine systems.

The legislation will not address nearby spraying of pesticides, which is another area of major concern, said Michelle Holman, a member of both the Mapleton and Lane Education Service District boards who joined Arkin at a Salem press conference this week to unveil the report.

“It’s a big issue for many of us out here, because we live in the Coast Range where there is a lot of logging and subsequent spraying, so it’s of utmost concern to me personally,” said Holman, noting that the Lane ESD Board has been vocal and unanimous in its support for reducing pesticide exposure in and near schools.

In September, concerned parents and others in Marcola rallied to protest the spraying of pesticides by timber companies Weyerhaeuser and Seneca in private forests near their schools and neighborhoods.

Greg Miller, a spokesman for Weyerhaeuser, said he hadn’t heard anything about a petition residents said they planned to deliver. He said the company follows all state and federal laws regarding the application of forest chemicals, and informs adjacent neighbors before spraying.

The broader question, he said — and the one addressed by the nascent legislation — is how schools themselves manage pesticide use.

“It ought to absolutely go forward,” he said of the legislation. “And I think we’re really just a minor aspect of it, frankly.”

Arkin said 25 percent of states already have such laws on the books, and several also have spray buffer zones around schools, not just riparian zones, as Oregon has.

“We’re not a leader in this regard,” she said.