Aerial Spraying

Seventeen residents from Curry County on the southern Oregon Coast complained of various illnesses after they were sprayed with a cocktail of toxic pesticides from a helicopter that was doing work for an adjacent forestland in October 2013. In 2014, these residents filed a lawsuit seeking damages, then brought their case to the State of Oregon. In the 2015 session, the Oregon Legislature voted to tighten the rules around the aerial spraying of herbicides and pesticides. Under the new law, among some tighter restrictions and larger fines, the buffer zone required for aerial spraying increased to 60 feet for homes and schools from the previous no buffer. This has not ended the debate.

illustrations by Karen Eland

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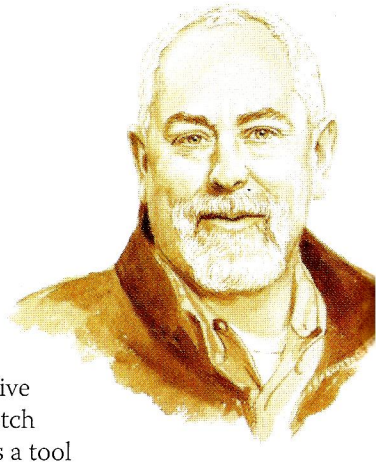
DRIVING ALONG ANY WESTERN Oregon highway, you'll see miles of forestry clear-cuts, a scene resembling a barren moonscape. To soften the visual desolation, signs are often placed in noticeable spots declaring when trees are replanted. The Oregon Forest Industries Council wants signs posted "for every replanted parcel that is facing a well-travelled roadway," ostensibly to reassure motorists.

There are no signs informing the public about the common forestry practice of using helicopters to spray a poisonous concoction of herbicides on clear-cuts. Aerial sprays occur at least three years in a row for each new clear-cut, resulting in an ongoing succession of aerial herbicide sprays across the landscape.

Industry reps contend that spraying herbicides is necessary to grow trees free from weedy competitors. Not so. Federal agencies banned aerial spraying of pesticides in western Oregon more than thirty years ago. Additionally, 35 million acres of America's forests are managed to meet Forest Stewardship Council certification standards, without herbicides. Oregon ranks last in sustainably harvested forest acreage among Western states.

Aerial spraying can allow chemicals with known adverse health effects, such as glyphosate, 2,4-D, and atrazine to drift long distances. Oregon's meager sixty-foot no-spray buffer for homes and domestic drinking water is too narrow to maintain when chemicals are sprayed from the air. Not surprisingly, state agencies receive many complaints of drifting herbicides sickening children and pets. In comparison, when it comes to protecting people and domestic drinking water, Washington requires 200- to 325-foot buffers and an environmental assessment.

No doubt Oregon has the most feeble regulations in the West when it comes to preventing poisoning from pesticide drift. Timber lobbyists have a long history of blocking improvements to Oregon's Forest Practices rules while touting that chemical applications comply with state law. It's convenient to claim that Oregon's laws are strictly followed when the bar is set so low.



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THE FIRST FEW YEARS of a young forest are critical to the trees' long term health. This is a time when trees are vulnerable to competition from weeds and invasive species such as blackberry and Scotch broom. Aerial herbicide spraying is a tool commonly used by foresters to promote healthy forest growth, while protecting human health and environmental quality.

Aerial herbicide spraying is high-tech. Modern aircraft use sophisticated precision equipment such as GPS (Global Positioning Systems), GIS (geographical information systems), flow controls and precisely calibrated spray equipment to ensure the pilot accurately applies the correct amount of product. Specialized spray nozzles put out droplets that drift very little on the air currents. Weather is monitored to make sure the spray doesn't go off target.

Herbicides are the best tool to control unwanted vegetation. Foresters use them sparingly during the first years after planting to give new seedlings a chance to grow, and then not again for another fotry years or more when the next rotation is planted. Herbicides are the most common type of pesticide used in Oregon forests. The most recent data (2008) show that only about 4 percent of all pesticide use in Oregon occurs in forests.

Herbicides are designed to kill plants and not harm other life forms. The specialized chemicals are applied at rates of a few ounces per acre and, when applied correctly, are low in toxicity to people, animals and fish.

The forest sector supports sensible laws and regulation of herbicides. People who break the rules need to be held accountable. Herbicides need to be applied carefully, sparingly and in full compliance with all state and federal laws. Public concern over the aerial application of herbicides, should be taken seriously. Regulations need to be dynamic, science-based and address legitimate public concerns.

Karen Eland painted both portraits with Stumptown Coffee and Worthy Brewing's Lights Out Stout.

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