

# The Register-Guard

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## NEWS

# Commercial-grade pesticide use at Willamalane's Dorris Ranch orchards in Springfield under scrutiny

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Allowing a historic orchard at Dorris Ranch in Springfield to remain commercially viable has for years meant using powerful pesticides, a practice some community members are asking to be changed because of its potential health impacts to neighbors and guests.

The Willamalane Park and Recreation District is conducting community meetings about the future of the park's filbert orchards and conflicts with nearby residents over pesticide use. The orchard crop helps offset the cost of running the park, but the district uses commercial-grade agricultural products to protect its trees from pests and disease.

"It's a unique situation for us because it's such a wonderful, beloved park, but we do have to treat and maintain the filbert orchard or, essentially, the orchard will die," Willamalane spokesman Kenny Weigandt said. "We're trying to solve this problem of how we can offer a unique, incredible park and still produce the filbert crop we need to produce."

Weigandt said pesticide application at the orchard started attracting negative attention this summer with community members asking alternatives be found.

Willamalane conducted its first meetings on the issue Aug. 19 and Sept. 30. Willamalane invited experts and community stakeholders to participate in those committee meetings. Willamalane plans to hold meetings through December, when staff is scheduled to bring recommendations to the board of directors.

## **Treating the orchards**

Dorris Ranch is recognized as the first commercial filbert, also known as hazelnut, orchard in the United States. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and 115 years ago was the home of George and Lulu Dorris, who planted the first orchards.

Dorris Ranch now has 9,250 filbert trees planted on 75 acres, according to Willamalane.

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Most of the orchards' trees are of a variety prone to contracting eastern filbert blight, a fungal disease that has been spreading in Washington and Oregon since the 1960s.

Willamalane is in the process of replacing the trees with blight-resistant filbert species.

Trees are treated with a variety of pesticides to ward off different problems, Weigandt said. The park or specific areas of it are closed to the public during pesticide treatment.

Willamalane, through a variety of means such as social media, emailed newsletters and signs around Dorris Ranch, announces scheduled sprays so people can avoid the area.

Among other chemicals, the orchards are regularly treated with the restricted-use pesticide Asana XL, which contains esfenvalerate, a chemical meant to kill pests but toxic to fish, bees and humans. It is a class of chemicals with generally low toxicity to mammals, but exposure can cause skin irritation, vomiting and breathing problems, according to the National Pesticide Information Center at Oregon State University.

Asana XL is applied with a spray, requiring safety measures to stop it from drifting on the wind. But a local nonprofit in August found evidence of the pesticide at a nearby home.

Willamalane contractors applied the pesticide in early August. Environmental justice nonprofit Beyond Toxics was alerted about the spraying and took samples from the garden of nearby residents once the spraying was finished before sending the samples to a lab.

Test results from samples taken from their vegetables showed traces of esfenvalerate.

"They were quite concerned because they grow vegetables and have small children," Executive Director Lisa Arkin said. "A public entity such as Willamalane must account for the fact there are people — families — living on the fence line of areas they're spraying."

Beyond Toxics filed a complaint with the Oregon Department of Agriculture, presenting the result of its sample. The nonprofit accused Willamalane of breaking state rules requiring a 150-foot exclusion zone, an area free of people except pesticide applicators.

An ODA agent was on site to observe that early August application of pesticide at Dorris Ranch and found no fault in the way Asana XL was being deployed around the orchards.

Weigandt said the ODA observer was there specifically to monitor for drift, a term describing a pesticide's movement through air. Weigandt said ODA took buffer zone samples during the spray period and did not find the pesticide had drifted beyond it.

"We follow that program as closely as we can," Weigandt said. "It's something we have to do to maintain that filbert orchard, but we're following a set of protocols every time."

In response to the complaint, ODA returned about a month later and took samples from the residents' property, Arkin said. ODA did not detect the same chemical in its tests.

Arkin questions the results' validity because samples were taken so long after spraying and because ODA tested an aggregated vegetable matter sample from the property.

Though ODA and Beyond Toxics samplings showed different results, Beyond Toxics Pesticides Manager Jennifer Eisele said chemical residue found in the park is troubling.

"It's very concerning because, normally, commercial orchard operations would be off-limits to the public. There wouldn't just be people wandering around in there being exposed to residues," Eisele said. "People, their pets and kids are in there all the time."

## **Exploring options**

Willamalane has held two committee meetings on the pesticides issues.

Willamalane plans to convene a committee for discussing alternatives monthly before presenting recommendations to the board in December. The board is responsible for any changes.

"The purpose is to identify what is the long-term future of how we run Dorris Ranch as a farm and a park," Weigandt said. "We're not just going to say, 'This is the way it is.' "

The committee included Willamalane staff such as Superintendent Michael Wargo, neighbors and members of the community, and representatives from the National Park Service, Oregon State University Extension Service and Beyond Toxics, Weigandt said.

"Willamalane will continue to work with supporting agencies like Oregon Department of Agriculture to make sure that all of our practices are fully compliant and follow all guidelines for safe applications," Wargo said in a statement. "We will continue to listen to the public and partner agencies to guide our practices."

Recommendations from the August meeting included prioritizing public health in orchard management and investigating organic practices, said Arkin, who attended the meeting.

Arkin said she is pleased a process for resolving pesticide issues at Dorris Ranch is underway, but said her organization had trouble getting information from Willamalane.

"It's been difficult for them to be open about what has occurred," Arkin said. "It was difficult to get public records request fulfilled. I think what we learned from those public records requests really has helped spur a better public engagement process."

Weigandt said Willamalane, over the last several months, has improved how and when the district communicates with the public about orchard treatments. He said permanent signs have been installed and the reach of closure email alerts has been increased.

Weigandt said district officials are listening to neighbors and trying to answer questions such as how much switching to organic farming practices would cost and if it's feasible.

"We're listening so that whatever decision we make going forward, we can make it as equitable as possible and be a really good neighbor," Weigandt said.

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