

The Register-Guard

ENVIRONMENT

Willamalane may adopt organic management practices at Dorris Ranch after pesticide use concerns

Adam Duvernay Register-Guard

Published 1:15 p.m. PT Dec. 4, 2021

Historic filbert orchards at Dorris Ranch soon may be treated for pests and disease with organic practices instead of commercial-grade pesticides on the recommendation of a committee formed to help the park's operator make visitors and nearby residents safer.

Willamalane Parks and Recreation District, which runs the historic park, established the committee after some community members this summer raised concerns with the Willamalane board about the pesticides used to sustain the commercial filbert orchards there.

The committee recommendations were presented Wednesday to the board of directors. The board eventually will vote on whether and how to change its current pesticide uses.

The Dorris Ranch Orchard Ad Hoc Committee, which includes representatives from the park district, the nonprofit Beyond Toxics and agriculture specialists, offered three plans the board could follow to reduce exposure to pesticides at the park. Each option calls for a switch to organic farming practices varying in the recommended pace for the changes.

"We wanted to make sure the park is safe for kids, especially because they sponsor a lot of educational events and market the park for that, as well as recognizing its importance for wildlife pollinators, and especially because of its proximity to the river and its role in maintaining water quality," said Lisa Arkin, Beyond Toxics executive director, who is on the committee.

Arkin also emphasized organic practices would be safer for people living near the park.

Dorris Ranch maintains 9,250 filbert trees planted on 75 acres in Springfield, according to Willamalane. Those trees produce a crop the park district sells to offset its expenses.

But the trees are susceptible to pests and disease, so Willamalane has been treating the orchards with commercial-grade pesticides.

Willamalane spokesman Kenny Weigandt said public reactions to the use of those pesticides became an issue over the summer.

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

Beyond Toxics took samples from a vegetable garden at home near the park after a Willamalane contractor sprayed pesticides in August. The nonprofit reported its samples were found to have traces of a pesticide used at the Dorris Ranch orchards.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture was on-site to monitor that August pesticide application but found no traces in samples taken from the mandatory spray buffer zone. ODA returned a month later to test the residence for chemical traces, but found none.

At a board of directors work session Wednesday, the committee presented its advice after several months of meetings on how Willamalane should manage the orchards in the future so they can remain commercially viable and be safer for those around them.

The committee met seven times before presenting the recommendations.

The committee recommendations included three plans:

Plan 1: The committee's preferred option, the entire orchard would transition to organic practices immediately with the goal of obtaining organic certification within three years. This option excludes "organic by neglect" management, which would eliminate the use of potentially dangerous chemicals and essentially leaving the filbert trees to live or die on their own.

Plan 2: The district's current contract would be modified to eliminate the use of Class 1 and 2 pesticides, removing pesticides toxic to aquatic organisms, those that can affect human health and those that persist in ground and surface water. Scheduled spraying would be adjusted to minimize harm to pollinators. The district would start "integrated pest management" practices, such as cultural, biological and mechanical pest control.

Over the next two years, Plan 2 calls for adopting organic practices. Over the following three years, the district would move to using methods approved for organic production.

Plan 3: The orchard will transition to organic management practices as outlined in Plan 2, but the "Road Orchard" Barcelona variety would be excluded. The plan excludes that variety, which was the first planted at the orchard, to protect the site's historic character.

Park's future: Willamalane seeking public's input on master plan for future of Springfield park

At the work session Wednesday, the board seemed to favor Plan 2, but asked district staff to return with more information about costs and whether its current orchardist can comply with the plan's provision.

The board meets next on Wednesday, Dec. 8 and plans to further discuss the future of pesticide use but may not make the final decision at the meeting.

The district also plans to update how it communicates with nearby residents and guests about pesticide use, Weigandt said, which informs guests and residents about pesticide spraying, in line with committee recommendations.

Contact reporter Adam Duvernay at aduvernay@registerguard.com. Follow on Twitter @DuvernayOR.