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Beyond Toxics leader finds politics obstacle to clean water, healthy forests

By Brad Mosher bmosher@countrymedia.net
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Politics may be an answer, but it is also a big obstacle when it comes to cleaning up the forestry industry in a state famous for being clean and green, according to a spokeswoman for a grassroots environmental group.

Lisa Arkin, executive director of the Eugene-based group Beyond Toxics, was in Wheeler Friday at a meeting of the Rockaway Beach Citizens for Watershed Protection.

“We want a future for our children. We want a viable climate and Oregon’s forests are the key,” she said.

“Because of the hullaballo caused in 2015 in the state legislature, a lot of our champions are saying to keep quiet in 2017,” Arkin said. “But I don’t think we should be quiet at all.”

“There are three huge environmental issues that are a priority before forestry,” she added.

According to Arkin, that just means people just will have to be the squeaky wheel. “We may not get everything we want in 2017, but the coalition of environmental groups working on this issue will be working on ballot measures to ban this stuff and putting pressure on the legislature to do the right thing. If that has to be 2018 or 2019, then it has to be then.

“That doesn’t mean giving up in 2017,” Arkin added.

She admitted that it is not only an environmental issue, but a health issue. That is where politics has become a big roadblock.

“Politically speaking, when a bill is introduced in the legislature, the senate president (Peter Courtney) or the speaker of the house (Tina Kotek) decide in what committee to put the bill. “That decision oftentimes determines the fate of the bill. Even if we demand they put it in the health committee, in the past consistently they have put the bills into the ag committee where they die,” she said.

“That is just the political reality. We have so many gauntlets to get through,” she added.

One thing is certain, the state’s inability or unwillingness to clean up its coastal waterways has cost the state millions in federal grant money.

According to Arkin, a Portland attorney filed a lawsuit with the federal Environmental Protection Agency that claimed the state was not meeting its requirements as part of the Clean Water Act.

“The EPA did come in inspected and agreed that Oregon had not met its obligations under the Clean Water Act for the coastal area. They yanked millions of dollars of federal funding,” she explained.

“Oregon has not agreed to improve its stream protection practices, as of yet,” Arkin added.

Beyond Toxics has worked with some communities and municipalities to ban chemicals that have been tied to hive collapse. “We were the group that brought to Eugene, Portland and the City of Milwaukee city bans on neo-nicotinoids - those are the bee-killing pesticides.

Pesticides and herbicides impact all living things, she added.

Toxic report

Beyond Toxics did the first report on what happens herbicides in forestlands, Arkin said.

“That report has set the standard for what you now know about forestry. That report divulged to the public that there were [chemical] tank mixes. No one really knew that before because the industry didn’t tell you. In fact, what they told you -- that it was just one chemical -- was a big, fat lie.

“We were able to show that they combined 2,4-D (2,4-Dichlorophenoxyacetic acid) with hexazinone (a broad spectrum herbicide), atrazine and ... they were just packing all this stuff in with petroleum oil and spraying the landscape,” she said.

In addition, the report showed that areas were being sprayed more often and the amounts of chemicals per acre were increasing, she explained.

Tree plantations sickly

Beyond Toxics partnered with some timber owners who manage their land more sustainably, she said. “We call them resilient foresters, who do not clear cut and do not use herbicides.

“They make sure there is diverse and mixed trees within their ecosystem. They create habitat for small animals. They don’t slash burn.

The group even arranged for tours by state legislators, Arkin added. “One of the timber owners said if only the public knew what really it really looks like inside a plantation -- a mono crop plantation.”

She told the people attending the meeting that her group found a way to look inside some of the forestry land by using a drone.

“We see the green tops, but we don’t look inside because it is private land,” she said, describing some of the commercial tree farms.

“So, Beyond Toxics hired a drone company and we went inside their forests. We went above the forests.”

The result was a web video the group has posted online called ‘Timber’s Cover-up.’

“It is a dead zone (inside). A working forest or a resilient forest will have alder, maple, oak, fir... all these different kinds of trees. It will have ground cover that the deer and the elk need to forage. It will have all these things in it and you could still take trees out to make money as well.

“But, what we found in the mono-crop plantations was that the ground was dry and dead,” Arkin said. “It didn’t have the rich litter and soils that are moist. It was dry soil that had no life in it.

“There were rows and rows (of trees) where no light could get down.” she added. “The trees grow quickly because they are fertilizing them and there is no competition from other kinds of trees. After about 15 to 20 years, they stop growing because they are compacted, the soil is dead and they can’t get light, except for the top.”

“Now, all these forest companies are cutting these forests down about every 30 years,” Arkin said.

When she was a Lane County commissioner for about eight years, Arkin said the typical rotation was like 60 years. “Now, it is in half. So, the land is pushed past its capacity to produce viable vegetation... and they are perpetuating all that other stuff every 30 years - the clear cutting, the spraying, the slash burning, the spraying again.

“The communities that are nearby are impacted by water quality, exposure to (herbicide) drift and volatilization,” she explained.

That is exactly what caused the creation of the Rockaway Beach Citizens for Watershed Protection several years ago – the desire to protect people, property and the watershed around the coastal community for herbicide spraying, according to Nancy Webster.