



## 8 things you should know about helicopter spraying of weed killers on Oregon timberlands

Curry County herbicide spray helicopter

The Bell OH-58A helicopter used by pilot Steven Owen that sprayed Curry County residents in October 2013.

*(Oregon Department of Agriculture)*

**Rob Davis | [rdavis@oregonian.com](mailto:rdavis@oregonian.com) By Rob Davis | [rdavis@oregonian.com](mailto:rdavis@oregonian.com)**

**Email the author | Follow on Twitter**

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For years, southwestern Oregon residents complained about being exposed to weed killers sprayed by helicopters onto nearby timberlands.

And for years, their complaints were dismissed or ignored by the responsible Oregon agencies, an investigation by The Oregonian found.

Complaints went ignored until last October, when the state finally got so many it had to do something. Twenty Curry County residents reported being sprayed by a helicopter flying overhead.

Here are eight things you should know about spraying in Oregon and the state agencies that regulate it.

### **1. Oregon agencies responsible for investigating off-target weed killer sprays haven't always done their jobs.**

Last October, 20 Curry County complained about being sprayed with weed killers from a helicopter. People reported numerous illnesses: A baby vomiting for 24 hours, severe headaches, sinus and gastrointestinal problems.

Though the industry called the incident isolated, other residents had complained before about the same pilot and same timber company.

But the responsible state agencies either botched their investigations or refused to chase the complaints down, **The Oregonian found.**

### **2. Before the October 2013 incident, state agencies ignored red flags for six years.**

Between 2007 and early 2013, residents of the same area in Curry County complained about sprays making them sick. One man reporting seeing a helicopter spraying in high winds. A woman worried sprays had killed her young dog and sickened her husband. A man said he, his wife and daughter got sick after smelling a spray.

The Oregon Department of Forestry threw out evidence in one case. It failed to pass on important information to

the Oregon Department of Agriculture. Both agencies refused to investigate whether a pilot sprayed in high winds in 2012.

### **3. Even today, the Oregon Department of Forestry's leader still refuses to chase down records that could substantiate one complaint.**

A man named Jim Sweeney complained in October 2012 that a helicopter was spraying in high winds near his home outside Gold Beach.

Jim Sweeney.

Rob Davis/The Oregonian

Gusts hit 27 mph that day, according to a nearby weather station, so fast it'd be nearly impossible to spray the right place.

Authorities in Washington who enforce spraying rules say they'd shut down that type of operation.

In Oregon, pilots are required to keep logs that show where they sprayed and what conditions they recorded. They must be provided to State Forester Doug Decker if he requests them.

The Oregonian asked Decker to get those records to see what conditions the pilot recorded that day. He declined.

### **4. Oregon does less to protect people and the environment from drifting chemicals than neighboring states -- Idaho, Washington and California.**

Washington requires a 200-foot no-spray buffer around homes. Oregon doesn't. Washington and California require advance notice for neighbors immediately before sprays. Oregon doesn't.

Oregon's protections are **the West Coast's weakest**, The Oregonian found.

### **5. Oregon's spray rules do more for fish than people.**

Pilots who spray near a stream with fish in it must leave a 60-foot buffer. Pilots who spray near homes aren't required to leave any buffer.

Drinking water streams require 60-foot buffers with no aerial spraying. Here's what the buffer looks like for one family's drinking water supply outside Gold Beach.



## **6. Washington has stricter spraying restrictions and gets fewer complaints.**

Since 2012, authorities in Washington have gotten just one complaint about forestry sprays drifting and affecting people.

Oregon received six in the same time – not including a 2013 Curry County incident when 20 people complained.

## **7. Washington and California ensure neighbors know about aerial sprays immediately before they happen. Oregon doesn't.**

Washington allows the public to comment on planned sprays and requires sites to be posted five days in advance.

Oregonians can get a vague notice of what might be sprayed sometime during a months-long window from the state Department of Forestry. And they must pay at least \$25 annually to receive the notices.

People hoping to avoid sprays must listen for the sound of an approaching helicopter as their only sign it's time to leave their homes or shut their windows.

## **8. Oregon agencies entrust spraying decisions to pilots, who have to follow label directions. But even the U.S. EPA, which writes those instructions, acknowledges that chemicals still drift.**

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency writes label instructions that say when and how weed killers can be

used. The instructions require pilots to avoid allowing the chemicals to drift and harm people.

But the EPA says aerial drift remains a problem, **estimating** that between 1 percent and 10 percent of all chemicals sprayed in agriculture miss their targets.

-- Rob Davis

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