

## A truce in herbicide wars

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Conflicts over the use of herbicides to control roadside weeds have been as much a part of Lane County's landscape as Himalayan blackberry vines, and just as thorny. But a task force representing groups ranging from the Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides to the Oregon Farm Bureau has reached a consensus on a new policy that would allow the use of herbicides under limited conditions. The consensus demonstrates common sense, and shows that with hard work and open minds, people can reconcile seemingly irreconcilable points of view.

Lane County placed a moratorium on chemical weed-killers in 2008, and since then has used mowers and manual methods to keep vegetation from encroaching on its more than 1,400 miles of roads. That suits those who regard herbicides as threats to human and environmental health just fine. But others believe the county has removed an effective tool from its kit — one that could have a role in helping maintain roads during a time of declining budgets and rising concerns about invasive plant species.

In 2014, the county created a Vegetation Task Force to review its weed-control program. The group included anti-herbicide activists, farmers, road maintenance experts, public health officials and scientists specializing in botany and weed control. It met throughout last year, and members grew to appreciate each others' perspectives. On Tuesday the county's director of public works presented the task force's recommendation to the county Board of Commissioners — and it calls for an end to the eight-year-old herbicide moratorium.

But if the commissioners adopt the recommendation after conducting public hearings, it won't be dispatching spray rigs to soak every mile of roadside with herbicides. The task force calls for a return to a county policy put in effect in 2003, which identified herbicides as the weed-control method of last resort. The recommendation then goes much further, reserving herbicides for use only when other methods of weed control are impractical or ineffective, and forbidding their use in places where people, wildlife, water or pollinators might be affected. The task force also says decisions to use herbicides must be data-driven, with careful tracking to ensure that the desired results are achieved.

The chemicals that would be used if the recommendation is adopted have not been identified. But many of them have already been ruled out: The task force says the use of herbicides containing known or suspected carcinogens, endocrine disruptors, toxins affecting reproductive or nervous systems or substances harmful to any type of terrestrial or aquatic species should still be banned. Property owners would also be allowed to ask that no sprays be applied along roads next to their land.

Even with these constraints, the task force members who are most critical of herbicides had to move toward compromise. Lisa Arkin, for instance, works to limit or eliminate herbicides as director of Beyond Toxics — but says she came to recognize that weeds can't be mowed or cleared manually behind a guardrail on a steep slope without endangering workers' safety. Task force members who regard herbicides as generally benign showed flexibility as well, recognizing that a science-based balancing of risks and benefits would be the most effective and economical approach to weed control.

The task force could not have reached its consensus without mutual trust in the good intentions of all members, and trust in the county's willingness to accept limitations on herbicide use. Such trust is hard to win, and easy to lose. If the recommendation is adopted, Lane County could serve as a model for other jurisdictions in Oregon and elsewhere — but only if it respects both the power and the limited utility of the tool it has been given permission to use.

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