

Tighten forest spray rules

A legislative proposal to protect residents of rural areas against exposure to herbicides sprayed on private forest lands has been sent to a work group, ostensibly because the issue is so complicated that lawmakers can't proceed until opposing groups reach a consensus. But it's really not complicated at all: Oregon needs to catch up with neighboring states in regulating aerial herbicide applications.

Senate Bill 613, the bill that has been punted to a work group, would tighten Oregon's rules in three respects. First, the regulations would provide as much protection to people, livestock and crops as they currently do to fish. Second, they would ensure that people are informed when herbicides are about to be sprayed nearby. And third, they would allow people to find out which chemicals have been sprayed on forests near their homes and drinking water supplies.

Oregon's Forest Practices Act requires helicopters spraying herbicides keep the chemicals away from a 60-foot buffer zone along fish-bearing streams. But there's no buffer zone for residences or agricultural lands. Notification requirements are weak, and information about which of a variety of weed-killing chemicals have been applied is difficult or impossible to obtain. Stronger regulations can be found in Washington or Idaho, and sometimes both. Washington, for instance, requires a 200-foot buffer around residences. And Idaho bans spraying within half a mile of agricultural lands.

Opponents of SB 613 insist that reports of human exposure to herbicides — such as the 2013 incident near Gold Beach, in which about 40 people say they were sickened after a helicopter sprayed herbicide over their homes — are usually the result of pilots not following rules that are already in place. They fear that the real objective of SB 613's supporters is to ban forest herbicides altogether, as has been done on federal lands.

Private forest land managers, however, should recognize that pressure for a ban will build after a few more incidents like the one near Gold Beach. Buffer zones and better notification would reduce the number of complaints about pets, livestock, gardens or children being exposed to aerial sprays. And making it easier for people to find out what chemicals have been sprayed near their property would keep people from automatically assuming the worst whenever a helicopter passes overhead.

The work group should not become a legislative cul-de-sac for SB 613. Oregon needs reasonable herbicide rules like those in neighboring states — and without them, less reasonable proposals will follow.



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