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The Spray Near You

Pesticide spray information at your fingertips

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Starting in the early '90s, Gary Hale and his wife, Jan Wroncy, who died in 2016, tracked herbicide sprays in Lane County. Concerns about herbicides travelling via waterways or drifting onto their property led the family to research potential spray sites and subscribe to a mail-in, pay-for-information system run by the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF).

As of this summer, the work Hale has been doing for more than two decades no longer requires the painstaking research or fees. Pressure from environmental advocates and a willingness by ODF to work with concerned citizens has led to a new and free online system to track forest activities

including herbicide sprays.

The new Forest Activity Electronic Reporting and Notification System (FERNS) system allows anyone with internet access the ability to research and set up notifications for planned forestry activities in areas they care about.

Under the old system, Hale and Wroncy subscribed to specific plots of forestland for \$5 dollars each and received information in the mail about planned sprays in these areas. For years the couple reported the planned sprays in a column for *EW* that informs readers about upcoming herbicide sprays.

Hale says they paid nearly \$300 a year to keep themselves and the community up-to-date on planned sprays.

In recent years, stories of poisonings from aerial sprays have grabbed headlines and cast a shadow over the forest industry in Oregon. Lincoln County voters approved an aerial spray ban in May (see “Aerial Spray Ban” *EW* 7/15). Petitioners are gathering signatures for a similar ban in Lane County.

The FERNS system gives contractors that use herbicides a six-month window to conduct approved spray operations. The forestry industry points to the operational challenges of predicting conditions, such as wind affecting aerial sprays, as a reason for having the half-year windows.

Advocates have challenged the duration of the windows, arguing that it doesn’t give neighboring property owners timely warning of potential sprays.

Proposed Senate Bill 892, which died in committee in the last legislative session, would have required aerial herbicide sprayers to file reports within 15 days after spraying.

“We want to know exactly where they sprayed and exactly what they used,” says Lisa Arkin, executive director of Beyond Toxics. “If, as they say, everything is according to the law and nobody ever drifts and all their chemicals are safe, then they should have no problem reporting what they did.”

Ted Reiss, timberlands manager for Seneca Jones, argued against the bill. He says that Seneca Jones already voluntarily provides information to neighbors and that the system would place an additional and unnecessary burden on companies in terms of paperwork.

One of the reasons for better reporting after a spray is that it would help people know exactly what was sprayed near their property. Many of the planned sprays reported in the FERNS system list five or more different chemicals to be used for a single spray.

"It's important to know the exact chemicals," Arkin says. "We know so much more now about what these chemicals do now than what we knew 10 years ago."

Arkin says the issue isn't necessarily the specific toxicity of a single herbicide used by the companies, but the long-term toxicity of the mixture of chemicals being used.

While most toxicity tests measure the lethal toxicity of a chemical, there are few studies looking at the risks of long-term exposure to low levels of pesticides and the interactions between multiple pesticides, she says.

Atrazine, one of the most controversial pesticides commonly sprayed in Oregon forests, is banned by the European Union. The chemical has been shown to affect the hormones of amphibians. A UC Berkeley study in 2010 found 75 percent of male frogs becoming "chemically castrated" and one in 10 male frogs switching sex to become female.

SB 892, like many other pieces of progressive environmental legislation in the last session, did not escape the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources.

Environmental advocates point to conservative Democratic state Sen. Arnie Roblan, who hails from Coos Bay, an area traditionally dependent on the timber industry, as the committee member who prevented the majority democratic committee from moving forward on proposed environmental legislation.

While activists would have liked to see the reporting rules tightened on aerial sprayers, the FERNS system does improve access to information on aerial pesticide operations. With free access to spray information, people living in timber country have a better chance of staying informed about herbicide sprays near their properties and the places they love.

To view upcoming sprays or set up notifications for sprays or other forest activities near you, visit ferns.odf.oregon.gov/E-Notification. Accounts and notifications are free, but EW recommends picking a small local area unless you plan on having your inbox flooded with notifications.

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