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Pesticide buffer bill brings out crowds

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SALEM - A bill creating "no-spray" buffers around schools drew impassioned crowds to the Capitol on Tuesday, where environmentalists, educators and scientists urged the bill's passage while agriculture, forestry and commercial pesticide applicators argued that the bill was an unwarranted threat to their livelihoods.

The bill would prohibit a state-licensed pesticide applicator from aerial spraying within one mile of school property during the academic year and within one mile of a road that services a school property during morning and afternoon commute times.

For backpack pesticide applicators, the no-spray buffer would be within a half-mile of school property and roads that service schools.

Longtime Springfield farm owner George Grier was among many with an agricultural background to testify against the bill. His farm has been next to Thurston Middle School since its construction in 1964. Grier said he tries to avoid using pesticides, but some instances - infestations of tansy ragwort, Canadian thistle, Scotch broom and other weeds - leave him with no choice but to spray. Some can only be controlled with herbicides. Those that can be controlled by other means force a choice that's not an environmental free ride, given that the use of fuel for his tractor causes pollution. And failing to remove weeds can lead to them spreading to neighboring properties.

"The cascade effect that this bill could unleash is astounding," said Grier, who called Senate Bill 20's ambition "a noble cause, but it will not accomplish that objective."

Eric Geyer, a forester and pesticide applicator for Roseburg Forest Products, said laws already exist to ensure that herbicides are applied with meticulous care. He told lawmakers to be dubious about warnings that schoolchildren's health could be compromised by these forest-management practices. He said restrictions on the use of pesticides within buffers around schools would infringe on the rights of landowners, based on what he called "unfounded fears and personal convictions."

Supporters said protecting children whose brains and bodies are still developing warranted SB 20's targeted restrictions on pesticide use.

In written testimony, the Lane Education Service District said it was "particularly alarming" that Marcola's Mohawk High School has been directly beneath aerial spraying of pesticides. The district drew that conclusion from a mapping project coordinated by the Oregon Toxics Alliance and the Forestland Dwellers.

Paul Engelking, a University of Oregon chemistry professor, cited his research for

the U.S. Army on the drift of chemical agents in leading him to study the same phenomenon with agricultural spraying.

Engelking said agricultural drift's exposure to "human target" is far greater than the farm industry's literature indicates. Larger drops that reach plant surfaces - intended to kill insects, weeds and other pests and plants - travel in distances measured by the meter. The vapors and small droplets that affect human health through inhalation, however, "are characterized by distances of kilometers," Engelking said.

Blachly resident Jan Wroncy, a science researcher, organic farmer and "no-spray" forest owner, said her life's work had informed her on two important issues in the debate over SB 20: that as children develop they are especially vulnerable to the ill effects of chemicals, and that all food and fiber crops can be grown successfully without the use of pesticides.

Wroncy dismissed the claims of farmers and foresters that the school buffer bill would force them out of business.

After the hearing, Chairman Brad Avakian, D-Portland, said he was interested in a second session to hear from opponents and supporters, but he said he was undecided on whether to work the bill in an attempt to push it to the Senate floor.

Fellow committee member Sen. Alan Bates, D-Ashland, said both sides had made their cases, and that perhaps a task force could be created to study the issue.

Environmental lobbyist Sybil Ackerman, spokeswoman for the multigroup Oregon Conservation Network, said members of her group, especially the Oregon Toxics Alliance, were working to get SB 20 passed.

But she also acknowledged that when evaluating which issues to coalesce around, this one didn't rise to the top along those such as renewable energy, keeping toxics out of rivers and improving recycling of computers.

"Last session, pesticides were an official priority," she said. "Now it's a subject a lot of our members care a great deal about."

In contrast, one of the leading lobbyists opposed to the bill, Paulette Pyle of the pro-pesticides group Oregonians for Food and Shelter, said defeating SB 20 was at the top of her clients' order of business. "There's no compromise," she said.