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Lane County considering herbicide use

By Matt Cooper The Register-Guard
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Opponents say Lane County Public Works' plan to return to herbicide usage this year violates the county's commitment to use the powerful chemicals as a last resort.

But a county plant specialist said limited staffing and the failure of other methods to get rid of troublesome weeds and shrubs make herbicides the last — and best — option.

Responding to concerns about health risks associated with herbicides, the Lane County commissioners voted unanimously this month to send back to committee a proposal to begin using herbicides along roads and other areas for the first time in four years. The roads department now seeks commissioner approval of the plan in March to start using herbicides as soon as April.

Lisa Arkin, executive director of the Eugene-based Oregon Toxics Alliance, said the department's plan for herbicides could violate the county's four-year-old "last resort" policy, meant to limit use of the chemicals to situations where safer methods have failed.

Arkin said the county's intent to spray herbicides along guardrails could cause runoff into neighboring waterways.

But Orin Schumacher, county vegetation management coordinator, said that under the department's proposal, the county wouldn't spray within 100 feet of streams or 200 feet of salmon-bearing waterways.

The Public Works Department also wants permission to use herbicides along the right of way in areas where public-private partnerships govern the land. In the Fall Creek area near Lowell, for example, the land is overseen by federal and local agencies and private timber companies, Schumacher said. The county wants permission to spray on its property to ensure that efforts by the other parties aren't compromised by leaving one area untreated, he added.

But Arkin said the county's pursuit of herbicides for the partnerships runs contrary to the goal of limiting herbicide usage. Nor can the county regulate the herbicides used by its partners, she added.

Some herbicides have been linked with cancer and other health ailments including weakness, nausea and abdominal pain, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The county-approved herbicides don't contain substances that are known or probable carcinogens, or otherwise acutely toxic to humans,

officials have said.

Arkin said the county department wrongly seeks permission for the maximum allowable amount of herbicides this year, rather than the minimum necessary. Schumacher disagreed, saying the department would treat only 30 to 40 acres.

Valuable land in Lane County is increasingly under attack by Japanese knotweed, French broom, meadow knapweed and 40 other noxious weeds vulnerable only to herbicides, he said.

It's a point of debate as to whether the county should be in the business of fighting noxious weeds in situations other than where public safety is at risk. But Schumacher is convinced that herbicides are necessary.

"We have a responsibility to preserve and protect native habitat and work as a good neighbor with adjacent property owners," he said.

The county's vegetation management committee voted 6-2 in favor of the county's plan. One of the dissenters, John Sundquist, said in public testimony that the plan "intends to use herbicides as a first resort rather than a last resort."

Arkin doesn't want to see the county lose its reputation as a leader in nonherbicidal efforts. A work group representing various interests plans to introduce a bill to the Legislature next month that would update the state's definition of pest management and mandate that human and environmental protection be two of the goals.

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