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Pesticide application worries neighbors

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A flurry of complaints about aerial pesticide application on private timberland south of Eugene is the result of a misunderstanding, according to the landowner, but residents say they'll be testing anyway to see if the toxic chemicals drift onto their property.

The trouble began when people living in the Fox Hollow Valley area learned that Giustina Land and Timber had notified the state it would be applying atrazine to areas slated for new planting in mid-March. State law requires private landowners to notify the state Department of Forestry when they plan to use herbicides, and the state makes that information available to anyone who asks. For those willing to pay a fee, the state will mail them the notifications.

When Fox Hollow residents saw that Giustina planned to spray more than 300 acres on clear-cut units south of them, they complained in letters to the company and local government officials.

"We vehemently protest your planned helicopter spraying starting March 10 and the widespread contamination that can occur through such a method," wrote Tricia Clark-McDowell and Forrest McDowell in a letter to Giustina. "We are asking you to find another way to keep grasses down in your clear cuts."

But Larry Giustina, a partner in the timber company, said that only one of the two notifications filed with the state involved aerial spraying and that it was in an area more remote from private residences.

The word "aerial" was inadvertently placed on one of the documents, when the plan was to apply the chemical by hand to about 156 acres, Giustina said.

"Some of those units aren't very far from residences," Giustina said. "Their concern is understandable."

Because of the misunderstanding, the company has decided to postpone spraying and revise its notifications to the state, he said.

Giustina plans to use atrazine, one of the nation's most widely used herbicides, to kill grasses and other plants that compete for nutrients with young trees. The herbicide allows the trees to get a good foothold in clay soil that will dry out in summer, said Kary Hart, a forester with Giustina.

Neighbors were relieved when they got a call clarifying the situation from a Giustia forester, said Lynn Bowers, a member of Forestland Dwellers, a group of neighbors in south Eugene.

“We’re very pleased with that result,” she said. “But this stuff is so bad, even the ground applications, that they should think of a better way.”

The Environmental Protection Agency, which regulates pesticides, classifies most atrazine formulations as a category III pesticide on a I- to IV- scale, with I being the most toxic and IV being the least toxic. The agency is assessing whether atrazine causes cancer in humans.

According to a fact sheet on atrazine at Oregon State University’s Environmental Health Sciences Center Web site, it is slightly to moderately toxic to birds, bees and small mammals in short-term tests. Water insects and plants are sensitive to low concentrations.

“Concentrations high enough to cause damage are unlikely in forestry situations except in the case of direct spray,” the fact sheet says.

State regulations require that those applying the herbicide leave a 10-foot buffer along streams used for drinking water or that contain fish. Aerial applications require a 60-foot buffer, and streams that already have a buffer of trees must also be protected from spray, said Brad Knotts, a policy analyst with the Oregon Department of Forestry.

Bowers said she and her neighbors will be setting up a drift catcher, a filter attached to a vacuum that will allow them to sample the air before the pesticides are applied and afterward, so they can get a better sense of whether the atrazine is traveling beyond the private forest boundaries.

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