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County board weighs herbicide use

By Matt Cooper

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Brian Davies/The Register-Guard

Lonnie Hackbart cuts blackberry vines that have grown into guardrails along Fox Hollow Road. Such overgrowth must be cut by hand.

To spray or not to spray?

That is, once again, the question in Lane County.

The county public works department, citing cuts to staffing, wants to use herbicides along roads for the first time in five years. Critics say the department should continue using alternatives to the dangerous chemicals.

At the heart of the issue is the county's pioneering policy on limited use of

herbicides — and debate over whether chemicals are truly the last and best way to kill destructive vegetation.

After a two-month period for public input, the county Board of Commissioners today could decide whether to return to herbicide use along roadways for the first time since 2003.

Public works staff favors herbicides to protect farmland and natural areas in the absence of county jail inmate crews that maintained roads and fought noxious weeds until cut from the budget last year, said Orin Schumacher, vegetation management coordinator.

“We’re losing the battle to control the county’s listed noxious weeds,” he said. “We’re seeing it every year in new areas that we haven’t seen it before.”

Public works wants to treat land totaling 30 to 40 acres. But herbicides and pesticides are a hot-button issue in Lane County regardless of the amount used.

The department has run into an array of opponents who cite health risks associated with the chemicals and want them used sparingly or not at all.

Last month, a demonstration in downtown Eugene in favor of non-herbicide means of weed control drew about 50 people, an organizer said. The event — focused mainly on roadside spraying by the Oregon Department of Transportation — resulted in controversial arrests by the city police department. Police tasered and arrested demonstrator Ian Van Ornum, and also arrested Anthony Farley and David Owen.

During the recent public-input period on the county’s use of herbicides, Schumacher received about 150 comments, and a solid majority emerged against the chemicals and in favor of other methods, he said.

Much of the debate boils down to money: whether it’s cheaper to spray chemicals than to remove vegetation by machine or by hand.

Lisa Arkin, executive director of the Oregon Toxics Alliance, Eugene-based health-advocacy organization, said public works hasn’t made the case for herbicides.

The department’s own reports show that a method called “hot foam” was effective last year against a noxious weed called false brome, but the department still clung to herbicides as being cheaper and more effective, Arkin said.

Schumacher said the hot-foam test case proved extremely high-maintenance and expensive.

But the herbicide debate is not limited solely to the different ways of killing weeds.

In his report to the county board, Schumacher said the county’s Vegetation Management Advisory Committee, a citizens’ forum, supports limited use of herbicides in the ways sought by the public works department: Against noxious

weeds that are difficult to control; along guardrails, especially where mowing is tricky; in road cracks to purge them of weeds; and in partnerships with other organizations.

Arkin said, however, that the advisory committee did not get a chance to review the department's latest proposal or alternatives such as the hiring of additional workers.

Committee member John Sundquist suggested in a highly critical e-mail that public works officials sidestepped the committee and are pushing ahead with a "duplicitous" effort for unnecessary herbicide use.

"This ... is just another example of how our committee, and the board of commissioners, have been deceived and manipulated by (public works') hidden agenda for the promotion of unnecessary herbicide use along county roadsides," Sundquist wrote.

Schumacher responded harshly, calling Sundquist's assertions false and noting that staff members have previously presented such alternatives to the committee.

Responding to public criticism of county herbicide use, the commissioners in 2003 adopted a "last resort" policy that favored more environmentally sensitive control methods — mowers and other mechanical equipment, for example — and allowed use of chemicals only when other options had failed. Public works placed a moratorium on herbicide use along roadways while the policy was practiced, Schumacher said.

The policy was a "pioneering" effort nationwide for its progressive approach, said Ross Penhallegon, a horticulturist with the Oregon State University Lane County Extension.

Herbicide opponents see the herbicide moratorium — now in its fifth year — as validation of no-spray approaches to weed control.

But Schumacher and Penhallegon said manual and mechanical efforts haven't kept up with an expanding noxious weed problem.

"There's not enough manpower or mowers," Penhallegon said — "we're losing the game on many fronts."

County officials have said the herbicides they want to use don't contain substances that are known or probable carcinogens, or otherwise acutely toxic to humans.

But according to Arkin, the proposed herbicides include at least two — Garlon and Aquamaster — with components that are carcinogens and "endocrine disrupters."

The latter group is of particular concern to Dr. Kenneth Welker, medical director of Oregon Optimal Health, a local practice that focuses on the root causes of illness.

Sperm counts in the United States have dropped 50 percent over the past 50 years, and the toxicity of herbicides and pesticides is "a major contributor," Welker said.

The herbicides — even in amounts perceived as extremely low — disrupt hormones, leading to increased estrogen levels in men and women. Men can suffer infertility problems; women can suffer problems with menstrual cycles and increased incidence of breast and uterine cancer, Welker said.

Children are most susceptible, Welker added, because their bodies don't eliminate toxins as easily as adults.

The Lane County Health Advisory Committee, instrumental in developing the county's last-resort policy, echoed health concerns in public testimony.

“(The committee) strongly encourages both Lane County Public Works and the Board of County Commissioners to weigh the real threats and costs to the health of the public resulting from herbicide use against the presumed financial and operational efficiency that may result from controlling weeds through herbicides,” the committee said. “On a full cost basis, herbicide spraying is a loser.”

State agencies, meanwhile, characterize herbicides as valuable tools, but ones to be used conservatively.

In public testimony, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife said herbicides bring environmental complications but “can be more effective and economical than other methods.”

The Oregon Department of Transportation, meanwhile, is considering a pilot project in Lane and Lincoln counties to replace the frequent use of herbicides with mechanical control of roadside vegetation, spokesman Joe Harwood said.

The proposal, which would cost \$2.3 million in additional staffing and other expenses, is a response to pressure to reduce herbicide use. But there will be “limited cases” that call for the use of chemicals, Harwood said.

“We need the flexibility to spray on a limited basis,” he added.

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