

The Register Guard: Guest Viewpoint

Poison forces all to pay price for timber firms' profits

By Victor Rozek

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One of the things polluting industries do exceedingly well is deny the relationship between cause and effect. In the first eight months of this year the Oregon Department of Forestry received notification of intent to spray herbicides on nearly 67,000 acres of private timberland in Lane County. For decades, industrial poisons have been unleashed upon the land. Timber companies claim this cumulative chemical soup has no effect on people. People disagree.

One woman I know describes herself as "extremely health-conscious." She grows organic food, keeps bees, and hasn't seen a doctor in a decade. When she learned the Seneca Timber Co. was planning an aerial herbicide spray in Western Lane County, she called and asked if they might reconsider and apply the chemicals manually. Her concerns were dismissed as groundless.

Unconvinced, she did her own research and discovered that chemical sprays can drift five to seven miles. My friend thought it was important to share this information with Seneca, so she drove to the company's offices. The guard at the gate said her name was on a no-entry list, and she was turned away.

When the helicopter started spraying, it took 15 minutes for the chemicals to reach her. She immediately began experiencing shortness of breath and burning in her throat and lungs. For five days she had no appetite and felt joint weakness and muscle pain, followed by four days of diarrhea. Her period, always regular, came a week early. For five months symptoms persisted: chest and joint pain, and a constant dryness in her throat no matter how much water she drank.

Eventually, her symptoms subsided. But the bees died.

Chemical spraying is one of the ways timber companies privatize profits while socializing costs. Companies such as Seneca and Weyerhaeuser Co. save labor costs, which the community pays in the form of health care expenses, water treatment costs and suffering.

Another woman I know was milking goats on her farm west of Veneta when a helicopter started spraying. She hoped she was far enough from the chemicals to be safe, but within minutes she was experiencing chest pain and felt so weak she couldn't lift the milk pail. She sought medical treatment, but was told chemical contamination can't be undone. There was little that doctors could do.

Medical research, however, is definitive: Agricultural herbicides and pesticides contribute to breast cancer, thyroid cancer, lymphoma, low sperm counts, birth defects, asthma and neurological and developmental disabilities in children.

The sprays affect children including those who attend Marcola Elementary School, above which Weyerhaeuser plans to do a massive aerial and ground spray. Inescapably, their herbicides will travel and drift beyond the company's land, which is why Weyerhaeuser strategically adds odor-masking chemicals to its noxious mix: People complain less when they don't know why they're sick.

Regardless of how careful Weyerhaeuser claims to be, and no matter how skilled its pilots, chemicals sprayed

on steep hills are subject to the effects of rain and gravity, wind and the violent air movement created by helicopters. Invariably, the chemicals will be blown about indiscriminately. They may land on cars and in backyards; they may infect toys and playgrounds, vegetable gardens and water storage tanks. They will wash down hill, enter streams and seep into groundwater. When children play on the grass and put their fingers in their mouths as children do, their bodies will get a dose of chemical cocktail. The poison will enter their system where it will remain — unwanted, unwelcome and, depending on the substance, unremovable.

My wife called Weyerhaeuser to voice her concern about the pending spray and spoke with a woman who assured her it was perfectly safe. When my wife expressed alarm that school would be in session during the week of the proposed spray, the woman replied that it would be good to spray while children were in school, because at least they would be indoors.

My wife was speechless.

Oregon

has among the nation's highest rates of breast cancer and autism, and although logging companies claim their chemical releases are safe, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency studies and scores of affected victims disagree. The woman on the phone at Weyerhaeuser was not to be swayed, however. She spent a lot of time in the field and in spite of that, she said she doesn't have cancer yet.

Unfortunately, the operative word in that sentence is "yet."

The whole point is that Marcola

residents do not wish to risk being poisoned for the benefit of Weyerhaeuser. In only 48 hours, 130 people signed petitions asking Weyerhaeuser to stop the spray. On Monday, that information was faxed to Weyerhaeuser. On Tuesday, Weyerhaeuser sprayed.

Modern forestry is a cycle of cut, burn, poison. The people of Oregon have endured flooding because of runoff from massive clearcuts; they have choked on the smoke from slash burns, and have been incrementally poisoned by years of chemical spraying. Enough.

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