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Herbicide proposal worries residents

By Matt Cooper The Register-Guard

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Environmentalists and other residents say Lane County's plan to use herbicides next year is a troubling departure from the county's policy of tapping the dangerous chemicals only as a last resort.

But Public Works Director Ollie Snowden said his intent is to use county-permitted herbicides only in specific situations where other methods don't work.

"We're not going to be doing mile after mile of spraying (along roadways)," he added. The county's financial crisis is hindering his agency's ability to use non-herbicide methods to control weeds, he added.

The department didn't use herbicides in 2006 and 2007. But the department said in a recent report that it anticipates the need for "limited" use of the chemicals next year. The Lane County commissioners will consider the department's plan on Wednesday.

Lane County's use of herbicides to battle weeds and brush on roadsides and other locations has been a periodic source of controversy. Residents over the years have pushed the county to sharply reduce herbicide use and adopt a policy that the chemicals only be used as a "last resort."

Some herbicides have been linked with cancer and other health ailments including weakness, nausea and abdominal pain, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

Snowden said the county-approved herbicides don't contain substances that are known or probable carcinogens, or otherwise acutely toxic to humans. He also stressed that the county won't use herbicides to replace routine mowing operations.

The herbicides would be used to control noxious and invasive weeds, maintain areas around guardrails, remove weeds growing in road cracks and to clear areas along new roads to make way for preferred vegetation, the county proposed in the report.

Cutbacks have left the county without the manpower and the equipment to control weeds along guardrails without herbicides, Snowden said. And efforts to control knotweed and knapweed by hand have failed because workers couldn't get at the seed banks below ground, the report said.

But Lisa Arkin, executive director of the Eugene-based Oregon Toxics Alliance, said the proposed plan would allow the department to expand the use of herbicides

beyond the county's established last-resort guidelines.

Use of herbicides along new roads prior to planting preferred vegetation is like taking an aspirin before you have a headache, Arkin said. "You use herbicides when you have a problem — not before you have a problem," she added.

Limited use of herbicides against noxious weeds is acceptable, Arkin said. But she contested the assertion that county-permitted herbicides are undeniably safe, saying the science to prove it is still evolving.

The county also proposes to partner with private land owners to use herbicides to protect native habitats. Arkin said the proposal is vague, and that the county and its private partners should instead be working on alternatives to herbicides.

A number of residents spoke on the topic at a county board meeting this week, urging the commissioners against expanding the use of herbicides.

Michelle Holman, a board member with the Lane Educational Service District and the Mapleton School District, said she's worried about children who could be exposed to herbicides while waiting along county roads for a school bus.

"I'm very concerned about toxic levels that the children have to endure because of big peoples' decisions," Holman told the board.

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