

COUNTY LOOKS AT SPRAYING ROADSIDES WITH HERBICIDES

Lane County is considering changes to its longtime ban on spraying roadsides with chemicals.

The Lane County Vegetation Task Force proposes changing from the current "Roadside Vegetation Management and Last Resort Herbicide Use Policy" to the "Roadside Integrated Vegetation Management Plan" that takes into account using a limited amount of chemicals to control vegetation.

The county has held open houses in Veneta and Creswell, and county spokesman Jason Davis says that the taskforce will review public comment and then give recommendations to the County Commission, which would then have a formal vote.

The changes proposed to Lane County Code are the first amendments to the policy in over a decade, says Lane Vegetation Coordinator Orin Schumacher.

"We manually and mechanically control 82 miles of guard-rail locations in our vegetation roadside program," Schumacher says. "We're finding that we're not adequately able to keep up with the blackberry problems and the woody stuff behind those guard rails."

Schumacher says the proposed new policy follows the advice of the Vegetation Management Advisory Committee (VMAC) that met over the span of 18 months before reaching consensus over a recommendation to make the policy, adding, "It's word for word what the committee suggested."

VMAC, made up of nine Lane County community members, came together to provide these recommendations, Schumacher adds. It's not staff or Lane County bringing these proposals forward.

Beyond Toxics Executive Director Lisa Arkin was a VMAC member. She says the county is currently operating under a "no spray" policy that coexisted with an integrated vegetation management (IVM) policy and that the two policies were at odds with each other. The Environmental Protection Agency defines IVM as "the practice of promoting desirable, stable, low-growing plant communities" that resist invasion by tall-growing

tree species through methods such as "a combination of chemical, biological, cultural, mechanical and/or manual treatments."

"The county commissioners saw that there was a mismatch there and appointed this task force to align them," Arkin says, "essentially saying that the no-spray policy is a no go."

Arkin says under the proposed amendments the county would still honor requests from residents who do not want chemical sprays on their properties' road frontage.

Lane County is the only county that has a policy prohibiting the use of herbicide to control roadside vegetation in the state, says John Sundquist, a Lane County resident and former member of VMAC. Lane County has the "best roadsides" in the state, he says, and the county isn't giving enough credit to how well the current policy has done thus far.

"I'm not opposed to the use of pesticides," Sundquist adds. "I think it's possible to use them judiciously and safely."

But Sundquist says he worries the proposed integrated vegetation management plan is difficult to understand and interpret as it stands.

The purpose of changing the current policy is partly due to injury claims and public conflict over crew out there working, Schumacher says, adding that crews have

rolled ankles, have made contact with poison oak, been stung by bees and nearly hit by passing cars.

"For the past 12 years the Lane County Roadside Vegetation Management has not used herbicides and we're really striving to keep anything that can be brought back in as a very limited approach," Schumacher says. "A very targeted and very limited approach."

He adds that this proposal is not like other programs across the country where roadsides are sprayed with herbicides to control vegetation. For example, Lane County plans to apply herbicide to tree stumps with a paintbrush as opposed to spraying chemical herbicide, Schumacher says. "We've learned over 10 years that we're just having a really hard time maintaining mechanically or manually right now," Schumacher says, "for safety, cost and effectiveness."

Schumacher says the proposed herbicides will be chosen from a permitted products list vetted through the Public Health Advisory Committee and the Board of Health.

Arkin says while she prefers a no-spray policy — because it can be done, and Lane County has shown that it can be done well with appropriate funding and staffing — she says this proposal is still the best in the state.

Sundquist has a harsher criticism: "My unsung question to every level of county staff is, if they thought the citizens were going to buy this proposal as presented, what were they smoking?" ■

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— JOHN SUNDQUIST

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