

VIEWPOINT BY LAURIE BERNSTEIN AND LISA ARKIN

Oregon's State Forests Under Fire

OREGON'S DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY SPRAYS HERBICIDES IN PROTECTED DRINKING WATERSHED

Most Oregonians think of our state forests as places to camp, fish, hike and picnic with family and friends. We go to state forests in search of old growth trees and hiking trails along pristine streams.

The reality is that state forests are primarily used for industrial timber production. The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) actively manages 745,000 acres of state forestlands. Timber harvests are carried out using the Forest Practices Act, the same rules as private timber corporations like Weyerhaeuser.

Timber on state lands is logged to generate “economic, environmental and social benefits” in the form of revenue that goes back to counties. However, the requirement that state forests make profits from timber sales has stoked controversy. The fight to save the Elliot State Forest — its old growth trees and endangered species — from timber sales and destructive logging is a recent example.

With the exception of the Elliot, the public is generally unaware that ODF treats state forests like corporate holdings, particularly when it comes to aerial herbicide sprays. Management of Oregon's state forests deserves greater public scrutiny, not only for trees and wildlife, but to protect drinking water systems fed by streams originating within Oregon's state forests.

Beyond Toxics' research on ODF's state forest management exposed a pervasive use of aerial herbicide sprays. The frequency of herbicide sprays and the lack of policies to protect public safety and drinking water quality led us to recommend legislative action.

Beyond Toxics worked with Sen. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland) to introduce SB 926, a ban on aerial herbicide sprays in Oregon state forests, in the 2019 Legislature.

Our call to action was based on documents we obtained through an Oregon public records request. State records revealed that ODF uses public dollars to pay for a program of corporate-style logging accompanied by aerial herbicide applications in state forests. Here are the results from our case study of Oregon's largest state forest, “Tillamook State Forest and Herbicide Spray Use 2015-2018.”

The Tillamook State Forest is publicly owned land located 40 miles west of Portland in the northern Oregon Coast Range. With dozens of trails and 89 designated campsites, this state forest provides a myriad of activities — hunting, camping, angling, hiking and sight-seeing, swimming, mushroom picking, etc.

State documents show that over a four-year period, more than 14,800 acres of the Tillamook State Forest were sprayed with herbicides. The vast majority, approximately 70 percent of these acres, were aerially sprayed with herbicides. The other 30 percent of the acres received ground sprays.

ODF awards contracts to private helicopter companies to carry out the aerial sprays. The contracts often require contractors to use tank mixes of 3-5 chemicals including glyphosate, metsulfuron methyl, aminopyralid, imazapyr, sulfometuron methyl plus multiple chemical additives.

Glyphosate, the active ingredient in the product Roundup, was used in 100 percent of the aerial tank sprays. The World Health Organization has recently announced glyphosate is “probably carcinogenic to

humans” and federal courts have concluded glyphosate causes cancer. A 2016 publication in the *Canadian Journal of Pest Management* determined that glyphosate is persistent in the environment, can contaminate ground water and deposit on surface water after being carried through the atmosphere via rain, wind and fog.

Herbicide vapors can continue to re-volatilize miles from their intended target long after the chemicals were sprayed, posing a potential risk to anyone enjoying a day in the forest. Under ODF's outdated laws, streams in public forests designated for domestic drinking water and fish habitat get a meager 20 yard no-spray buffer — imagine a helicopter spraying herbicides 20 yards from players on a football field.

We found that ODF authorizes aerial herbicide sprays in domestic drinking watersheds serving residential users and municipal drinking water systems. Two other state agencies, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) are charged with drinking water protection under the federal Clean Water Act. These agencies spend public funds to study and identify domestic drinking watersheds that are vulnerable to contamination. Seemingly at cross-purposes with the work of its sister agencies, ODF conducted aerial herbicide sprays on clearcuts overlapping within State Protected Drinking Watersheds. In the case of the Tillamook State Forest, the water coming from these protected areas provides drinking water for thousands of Oregonians living in Timber, Hillsboro and Cherry Grove.

On April 2, the bill to ban aerial herbicide sprays in Oregon state forests (SB 926), died in committee following a truncated hearing without any discussion about the risks of spraying tank mixes of herbicides in state-designated “protected” drinking watersheds.

Oregonians, take heed. If we share the value of clean and abundant water from healthy forests, then keeping pesticides out of drinking water should be one of our State's public health priorities. Aerial spraying is not necessary, as proven by Corvallis, Portland and Forest Grove, cities that get some or all of their domestic water from streams in forest holdings. These cities don't clearcut or spray herbicides in their drinking watersheds. Instead, they prioritize public health benefits first and foremost.

Our state forests have many beneficial uses, from recreation to drinking water to forestry. Our State Lands Board and Board of Forestry can end industrial-style aerial herbicide sprays on state land without sacrificing revenues to counties. Inaction to change the current status quo fails the test of balancing beneficial uses.

Laurie Bernstein and Lisa Arkin are with Beyond Toxics

Protecting drinking water through resilient forestry practices is one of Beyond Toxics' most important programs.

Come join a summer Resilient Forestry Tour to experience bio-diverse timberland managed for a future of clean water, wildlife and carbon sequestration.

10 am, Saturday, June 22, Willow-Witt Forest Tour,
Cascade-Siskiyou Range, Jackson County

10 am, Saturday, July 20, Shady Creek Forest Tour,
Coastal Range, Lane County
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