



Capital Press

A crop duster sprayed a potato field with fungicide.

Ag groups claim regulators misrepresent pesticide data

Requests for more context

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Oregon regulators have come under fire from agriculture and forestry advocates for allegedly misrepresenting information about pesticides in waterways to the public.

A new online data viewer displays information about pesticides detected in 12 river basins by the state's Department of Environmental Quality and Department of Agriculture.

The state government promoted the interactive tool as helping "Oregonians who want to know what pesticides are in their local streams," but several natural resource organizations say that's an inaccurate characterization of the data.

"We dug into what the tool is showing and how it is being presented, and it is so misleading," said Mary Anne Cooper, vice president of government affairs for the Oregon Farm Bureau. "It has a high likelihood of being used against producers on the ground."

The tool invites data to be taken "out of context" and "will surely result in unjustified concerns over water quality," according to the Oregon Farm Bureau, Oregon Association of Nurseries, Oregon Forest Industries Council and Oregonians for Food and Shelter agribusiness group.

"The presentation is almost what we'd expect from activist groups," Cooper said.

The problem is not that the data is incorrect or that it's being disclosed, since the information has always been publicly available, she said.

Rather, the online tool fails to explain that data was collected at highly targeted locations and times when pesticides were more likely to be detected, said Katie Murray, executive director of Oregonians for Food and Shelter.

"This is a very biased data set — intentionally biased," Murray said.

The data was gathered as part of the state's Pesticide Stewardship Partnership, which was formed by the Department of Environmental Quality, the Department of

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Katie Murray | executive director of Oregonians for Food and Shelter

Agriculture and other agencies in 2000 to support voluntary improvements to pesticide practices.

By taking samples immediately downstream from farms after spring rains, for example, the program seeks to maximize detections, according to industry groups. Pesticide users can then see if their strategies to keep chemicals out of waterways are proving effective.

To monitor for pesticides on a watershed-scale, however, samples would need to be taken at random sites and times, with the data likely reflecting less frequent pesticide detections at lower concentrations, they said. Without these caveats, though, the government's online data viewer creates an exaggerated impression of pesticide levels and health risks.

"That's not what that data meant. It's telling the wrong story," Murray said. "DEQ is actively presenting this data as if we can generalize from it about the safety of the water and we cannot. They're encouraging people to misunderstand this data."

A stakeholder advisory committee raised concerns about such misperceptions, which government officials seem to have ignored, critics say. The Pesticide Stewardship Partnership relies on cooperation from farmers and other pesticide users, but the online tool threatens to undermine that trust.

"Nobody knew that is how they'd use the data 10 to 20 years down the road," Murray said.

The Pesticide Stewardship Partnership's data-driven education has been more effective at reducing water pesticide levels than standard regulatory approaches, Cooper said. In recent years, however, the program hasn't engaged as closely with indi-

vidual farmers.

Now, the data viewer will likely serve as a cudgel in legislative disputes over pesticides, particularly since it implies "even the agencies acknowledge this is a problem" with waterway pollution, she said.

"You're just going to inflame situations," Cooper said. "It makes it hard to see how they will explain the full picture to lawmakers and the public."

When asked about these concerns, the Department of Environmental Quality said the tool provides "additional context" for the "current and historic monitoring data," such as federal benchmarks for protecting "the health of aquatic life and humans."

"To aid the public's understanding of the data, and to address concerns that the raw data could be misinterpreted or misused, DEQ displays the data in the manner consistent with how DEQ and ODA interpret the data to manage the program," the agency said in an email.

The Department of Agriculture said the data tool is "not intended to be a comprehensive source of pesticide distribution in state waters," but helps pesticide users and other partners achieve "measurable environmental improvements."

In response to feedback from stakeholders, a pop-up explaining the context and scope of the data now appears when the online tool is accessed, the agency said in an email.

The data viewer was developed by Department of Environmental Quality to provide transparency and easier access to program data, and the Department of Agriculture is "committed to working with DEQ to periodically update" the tool, the agency said.



Megan Farmer/KUOW

Rachel Kidd, in blue, gathered with other members of the Chinook Indian Nation and allies on the steps of the Henry M. Jackson Federal Building on Monday in Seattle.

Chinook Indian Nation members rally for federal recognition

Protest held in Seattle

By SCOTT GREENSTONE
KNKX

SEATTLE — Members of the Chinook Indian Nation rallied on Monday on the steps of a federal building to raise awareness for their long fight to get federal recognition.

Tony Johnson, the tribal chairman, said his great-great-grandfather and other leaders first hired lawyers to sue for their lands back in the 1890s.

Federal recognition would mean access to federal dollars for health care and housing for the Chinook, who are based in southwestern Washington state, particularly Pacific County. The rally was the start of a campaign by Chinook leadership, they said, to pressure U.S. Sen. Patty Murray and U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell — Washington state Democrats — to use their influence in Congress to get the Chinook recognized.

For a brief time 20 years ago, the Clinton administration recognized the Chinook Indian Nation, but the Bush administration revoked that decision in

2002 after another Indigenous nation in Washington state, the Quinault, appealed to the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Johnson said during a speech on Monday that the Chinook Indian Nation, which is made up of five tribes — the Cathlamet, Clatsop, Lower Chinook, Wahkaikum and Willapa — refused to sign a treaty that would force them to lose their land and therefore was never moved to a reservation.

"That place where I drove from this morning with my wife and two of my five kids is the place where our sovereignty springs from," Johnson said. "We are a sovereign nation, regardless of the government's confusion, and our sovereignty comes from the land and our ancestors."

Johnson's son Tahoma Johnson was there as well, and he said opportunities for work and housing in Pacific County are scarce. He lives in a trailer on someone else's property, according to his father.

"That really bugs me because a recognized Chinook (nation) would have an opportunity to provide him housing," Johnson said.

Rachel Cushman, the secretary-treasurer for the Chinook, said she was just 15 in 2002 when she heard the news of the Bush administration's revocation of her tribe's status. After crying with her mother, she still had to get on the bus and go to work — at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, where she was apprenticed to a fish biologist.

"I didn't want to go into a space that made me feel less than, because that's how I felt my whole life," Cushman said. "I felt less than. And I was made to feel less than. I went into an office full of Native people feeling less than."

Cantwell did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Zack DiGregorio, a spokesperson for Murray, said in a statement that she understands how important tribal recognition efforts are and "how critical it is that all voices involved be heard" but didn't commit to making any changes.

"She will continue to do her best to serve as a voice in the United States Senate for Washington's tribal governments and tribal people," DiGregorio said via email.



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