

Pesticide levels drop in Oregon waterways

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

BOARDMAN — Pesticide levels in some key Oregon waterways have dropped to a fraction of their former concentrations due to changes voluntarily adopted by farmers, according to environmental regulators.

Monitoring by Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality has found that growers are willing to alter spray regimens to achieve successful water quality results.

"Overall, we've seen improvements in a number of agricultural areas, particularly in the Columbia plateau. We've seen agriculture respond to the data," said Kevin Masterson, DEQ's toxics coordinator.

About 50% of the waterway sites tested under an interagency "pesticide stewardship partnership" program showed progress in pesticide detections and concentrations during the 2015-17 sampling period, compared to the previous biennium.

Roughly 27% of the tested sites showed declines in water quality from pesticides, while 23% showed no change during that time, according to data compiled by DEQ.

Those numbers don't tell the whole story, however, because the monitoring is targeted toward streams where pesticides are detected, while those without occurrences are dropped from testing, said Masterson.

"It is a targeted monitoring program," he said, adding that



An aerial applicator sprays a field. Oregon regulators have seen reduced pesticide levels in key waterways.

the water quality improvements are noteworthy given regulators are focusing on areas with problems. "What we don't find is as important as what we do."

The monitoring program has resulted in significant reductions in pesticide levels in such watersheds as the Walla Walla, where the concentration of diuron herbicide has effectively fallen to zero from a maximum level of 18.9 micrograms per liter and an average level of 1.5 micrograms per liter in 2010.

When presented with the diuron data, the local irrigation district stopped treating ditches with the herbicide during dry periods and instead switched to mechanical removal and spot-treatment with a less toxic and persistent chemical, Masterson said.

Concentrations of the malathion insecticide have likewise plummeted in the Wasco basin, where cherry growers are now more reliant on weather stations to time their

spraying, according to DEQ. Aerial applications now occur on the interior of orchards while areas near streams are sprayed by hand.

Not every waterway under scrutiny has seen a decrease in pesticide levels — those in the Willamette Valley, for example, have generally seen concentrations rise and fall without a clear trajectory, said Masterson.

"In a lot of areas, we haven't seen sustained trends for pesticides of interest," he said. "Even though it's a challenge in some watersheds, it's been a success in others."

Decreasing pesticide levels in water is generally more straightforward in regions primarily dedicated to certain crops — Walla Walla for apples, Hood River for pears, Wasco for cherries — compared to those where agricultural land use is less uniform, said Kirk Cook, pesticide stewardship specialist at the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

"Those are usually where

we have a wide diversity of crops grown and chemicals used," he said.

For the same reason, more progress has been seen among farmers compared to more numerous city dwellers, who are more difficult to communicate with on a large scale, said Masterson. "We've been able to see major declines in agricultural areas that we haven't been able to see in urban areas."

Farmers have generally taken pride in seeing a positive response from their efforts to keep pesticides out of water, said Cook of ODA. "Any regulatory action that you take is generally something that is forced on them. People are going to react negatively to something that is forced on them."

There's also an incentive to take voluntary action because growers know that a lack of improvement could result in regulatory action that cuts off access to pesticides, he said.

For pesticides subject to the federal Clean Water Act, exceeding benchmarks for concentrations in water could result in a more restrictive "total maximum daily load" process than the current voluntary approach, he said.

Exceeding benchmarks for other "pesticides of concern" identified by Oregon regulators could also cause those chemicals to be pulled from the market if voluntary action were ineffective, Cook said.

"That would not be available for the applicator community to use," he said. "Our goal is to not have that happen."

Chamber purchases horses on wheels

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Travel Pendleton is calling them "mobile visitor kiosks," but the agency's newest tool is going by a different name on its product webpage: motor pony.

At a Pendleton City Council meeting Tuesday, Travel Pendleton tourism and hospitality manager Kristen Dollarhide reported that Travel Oregon had just awarded the tourism arm of the Pendleton Chamber of Commerce \$15,000 to buy two motorized horses chamber employees will ride around to boost tourism.

Dollarhide told the council that her original idea was to use live horses, but she was quickly rebuked.

"I called the insurance agency and they said, 'Uh, no,'" she said.

Dollarhide saw the motor ponies at a trade show and thought it might be a good alternative to a live animal.

The grant will pay for two motor ponies, two saddles, information flags, saddle bags, itineraries, visitors, and a "tourism ambassador" that will help run the outreach project.

Dollarhide said the ponies will be perfect to take out on the town and assist tourists when the chamber's 501 S. Main St. office isn't open or during big events like Pendleton Whisky Music Fest or Pendleton Bike Week.

But Travel Pendleton

doesn't plan on restricting the vehicles to in-city jobs.

Dollarhide said the chamber also wants to take them to conferences and trade shows to promote Pendleton and Eastern Oregon tourism.

Travel Pendleton might also take it to Portland on the weekends, with the expectation that the sight of the motor pony will drum up interest in Pendleton tourism.

"We want visitors to experience Pendleton, Eastern Oregon, and everything we have to offer," she said.

Councilor Paul Chalmers asked if Travel Pendleton will hold a naming contest for the inanimate horses, and Dollarhide said the chamber is discussing it.

According to the motor pony manufacturer's website, Rodeo Zone originally began developing motorized horses and livestock as a rodeo training tool for people looking to train for bronc riding and bull riding without having to actually strap onto a live animal.

After developing motor ponies for cowboys to train on for roping events, Rodeo Zone eventually expanded its business to include the general public looking to use Rodeo Zone's products for entertainment purposes.

Dollarhide said many of the mechanical horses featured on Rodeo Zone's website are its largest model, but Travel Pendleton will use a smaller size.

Travel Pendleton plans to debut the motor ponies in 2020.

Umatilla high schoolers get a taste for space

By JESSICA POLLARD
East Oregonian

UMATILLA — The first all-female spacewalk in NASA's 61-year history is Friday. But before the space agency focused its attention on making history, it took some time out Thursday to give some Umatilla County students the chance to go behind the scenes of the historic event.

Students from Umatilla High School spent time learning how NASA astronauts Jessica Meir and Christina Koch will fuel up and climb into their space suits in a zero gravity environment.

Robotic teacher Kyle Sipe tuned high-schoolers into a live chat session with Angela Case, a program coordinator at Space Center Houston, who showed students about how astronauts live day-to-day in spite of zero gravity.

"When you're in space, there is no up or down," Case told the students.

Through the video session, students made guesses about what astronauts eat for dinner and how long they exercise each day in order to avoid muscle atrophy — many students in the room guessed it was five hours a day, but it's actually just two.

When the presentation ended, students had the chance to ask questions with Case via chat, who answered them in real time.

They learned that the longest time anyone's spent at the ISS — which is the



Astronauts Christina Koch, right, and Jessica Meir pose for a photo on the International Space Station.

size of a football field — has been one year, and that zero gravity has no effect on swallowing and digesting food.

Sipe said that attendance to the session was much

larger than he anticipated. He said many students are focusing on astronomy in science class this month and the opportunity to learn more about the life of an astronaut couldn't have been

better timing.

He added that it's not the school's first interaction with NASA. In 2011, the robotics team won a NASA scholarship to help boost the program during its first year. And in 2017, then-junior Anthony Ibarra traveled to Florida to participate in the International Space Settlement Design Competition.

"I'm excited kids got a chance to ask questions and interact with someone from the Space Center," Sipe said.

Koch and Meir were initially supposed to do their spacewalk from the International Space Station on Monday. NASA announced the scheduling change this week in light of issues with the space station's battery charge-discharge unit, which Koch and Meir will replace, according to National Public Radio.



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