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Residents tested for pesticide

Activists tell the state Board of Forestry that Triangle Lake residents' urine samples came back positive

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SALEM — Anti-pesticide activists brought more than complaints to a state Board of Forestry meeting on Friday afternoon. The Triangle Lake residents, who for years have been lobbying and agitating against aerial sprays of herbicides on the timbered slopes around their homes, came with data that showed two herbicides in the urine of 21 community members, including children.

The samples were tested by Dana Barr, a research professor at Emory University's Environmental and Occupational Health Department. Barr, a former researcher at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is considered an expert in assessing human exposure to a variety of toxic compounds. She found two powerful weed killers, 2,4-D and atrazine, in the urine of all 21 residents who submitted samples to her lab earlier this year.

Speaking by phone from her Atlanta office, Barr told the Board of Forestry that populationwide studies have shown that most of us have detectable levels of some pesticides in our bodies, but 2,4-D and atrazine are found in just 2 to 4 percent of the population. Barr found both chemicals in all of the 21 Triangle Lake residents she tested. They went to a doctor's office to give their samples and the doctor forwarded the samples to Barr's lab. Samples were taken during the winter before spring spraying began, and some residents submitted a second sample after helicopter sprays occurred near their homes. The second samples showed an increased amount of the herbicides, she said.

"The data suggest these individuals are being exposed to these herbicides," she said.

Day Owen, for example, showed a 31 percent increase in the amount of 2,4-D and a 129 percent increase in the amount of atrazine in his urine between the first and second tests. His neighbor Eron King had a 54 percent increase in 2,4-D and a 163 percent increase in atrazine between the two tests. Her two sons also tested positive for the weed killers.

No one, not even Barr, knows how they were exposed.

Barr presented information at the second of two meetings the Board of Forestry held

specifically on pesticides. The board oversees the Department of Forestry, which manages state forests and sets the rules that govern logging on Oregon's hundreds of thousands of acres of privately owned forests.

It had been previously thought that the human body quickly flushes such toxins out, but Barr said this new data supports growing evidence suggesting that fat tissue might actually store herbicides, meaning they clear more slowly from the body than previously thought.

Board member Peter Hayes asked Barr for suggestions about what to do next.

"A simple drift study would be useful," Barr said. "How (the exposure) is occurring I'm not sure."

Barr's presentation was just one of several at a three-hour long work session. Pesticide industry representative George Ice, of the National Council for Air and Stream Improvement, described new research being done in the Alsea area that compares the environmental impacts of current logging practices to those of the 1960s. The results are still being analyzed but show much less harm to the environment, he said.

The three hours of discussion included passionate statements by people who live near private forests and say the aerial sprays are making them sick.

Maya Gee, an organic farmer, said she has been repeatedly exposed to harmful chemicals that have made her ill since moving to the Triangle Lake area in 2006. She is among those who tested positive for the herbicides.

"Enough is enough," she said as she opened a suitcase and pulled out books about the harmful effect of pesticides and passed them out to board members. "I don't want these chemicals in my body."

Owen, his voice rising, threatened to sue the state for what he said was failing to follow the best science in regard to permitting herbicide sprays.

"We found out just two days ago, virtually 100 percent of us have atrazine in our urine. Imagine what it feels like to be told that," he said.

The board also heard passionate remarks from private timber representatives, including Ted Rice a forester with Seneca Jones, who said the residents' accusations were not backed up by science.

Foresters provide products that society wants, Rice said, and foresters live and work on the land and care for it as much as their neighbors do.

"We are not interested in harming our neighbors or harming wildlife," he said.

Rice said he wanted to see more thorough research. And so did two others who attended the meeting, Oregon State University researcher Jeffrey Jenkins, a professor in the environmental and molecular toxicology department, approached Day after the meeting and suggested testing the well water of some of the residents.

Joshua Seeds, an ecologist with the state Department of Environmental Quality's drinking water protection division, said his agency could test the wells of any public facilities in the area such as the local school. Both Seeds and Jenkins speculated that the herbicides might be getting into the water and thus into the wells of area residents.

"These are rather startling results," Jenkins said. "As a toxic environmental chemist, you ask yourself, how could they have been exposed?"

The United States Geological Survey has done general testing of the Willamette basin waterways for pesticides, but no tests have been done of the creeks and streams feeding Lake Creek and Triangle Lake.

According to state records of pesticide use, atrazine and 2,4-D, are among the most common herbicides applied in 2008, the last year the state funded the reporting program. 2,4-D ranked seventh and atrazine 18th on the list of 100 most used pesticides.

In the North Coast region that runs from just south of Dunes City north to Cannon Beach and encompasses the Coast Range, 2,4-D and atrazine are the second and third most used herbicides according to the state list.

But forestry uses of pesticide account for just 4 percent of the total amount used in Oregon. Agriculture is by far the biggest user of pesticides, applying 77 percent of all the pesticides used in Oregon in 2008, state records show.

And that is part of the dilemma for the Oregon forestry board. While forestry oversees the rules governing application of herbicides on forestland, it's the Department of Agriculture that has the regulatory responsibility for making sure the state complies with federal law, while another board, the Pesticide Analytical and Response Center, investigates and responds to complaints like those raised by Triangle Lake residents.

Board members will need time to think about the presentations they heard, said board President John Blackwell.

"I don't like the polemics but I want to embrace the science," Blackwell said. "We're all partners in this and as partners we really have to cooperate."

Atrazine has been shown to damage the body's hormone system, Some research shows that in very low concentrations it has altered the biology of frogs, converting males into females, who can mate with other males but who only produce male offspring.

In humans, some research suggests a link to prostate and breast cancer and infant mortality. Some evidence suggests that 2,4-D can cause cancer.

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