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### County keeps ban on roadside weedkillers

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The Lane County commissioners on Wednesday extended indefinitely their ban on using herbicides along county roads, delivering a victory to health advocates but complicating efforts to maintain safety and protect public rights of way.

County public works staff sought permission for the first use of herbicides along roads in five years, citing a growing problem with unwanted vegetation due to reduced manpower.

But the commissioners, acting as the Lane County Board of Health, instead voted unanimously to keep in place indefinitely a moratorium on herbicides and hire two workers to battle weeds and other destructive plants.

“Why don’t we just say, ‘No herbicides,’ and let’s just move forward,” Commissioner Bobby Green said at the meeting, receiving applause in a boardroom crowded with herbicide opponents and others. “This is something that we need to put to bed.”

The vote was the latest chapter in a saga that the board sought to address in 2003, when it developed an innovative policy to use the chemicals only as a “last resort.”

Public works stopped the use of herbicides along county roads at that time. But unwanted and destructive plants have spread in the interim, especially with recent cuts to the staff that combats the problem, the department said.

Roadways are conveyor belts for the spread of bad weeds. Public Works Director Ollie Snowden said that without herbicides there will be growing problems in two areas: blackberries that block motorist visibility and crowd out bikers and others along the sides of roads; and destructive weeds and plants that threaten natural areas and other valuable land.

The hire of two workers will help the department address hotspots of concern — say, blackberries growing so thick they obscure a stop sign. But overall, weed problems will worsen along the 2,400 miles of county-owned roads, said Orin Schumacher, vegetation management coordinator.

George Grier, treasurer of the Lane County Farm Bureau and a farmer of 35 years in the Springfield area, said the board’s move is penny-wise and pound-foolish.

“These weeds are going to spread along county roads to farmland, recreational land, schools, public parks — all over the place,” Grier said. “You have a chance to use a strategic (amount of herbicides) in a small place ... or, if you don’t, you’ve got to use more and more herbicides throughout the watershed as the problem spreads.”

Chris Orsinger, executive director of Friends of Buford Park & Mount Pisgah, said in public testimony that invasive plants are “an enormous threat” to ecosystems and wildlife in the 2,300-acre Buford Park southeast of the metropolitan area.

Non-herbicide methods are preferable, Orsinger said, but “herbicides can sometimes be the only effective method to control certain particularly persistent invasive species.”

But health advocates, including some residents who are highly sensitive to herbicides, cheered continuation of the ban on chemicals.

Jan Wroncy, who lives west of the metropolitan area, said she has a disorder that prevents her body from fighting the toxins in herbicides. She said she suffers from severe headaches and high blood pressure and is unable to use roads that have been sprayed.

“I really can’t drive the road because I get so sick,” Wroncy said. “It’s huge for me.”

The board directed public works to find the \$113,000 necessary to hire two workers for roadside maintenance.

The money will probably come out of the county road fund, Snowden said, but there could also be savings in not buying spray equipment.

County staff also was directed to present options for the future of the Vegetation Management Advisory Committee, a citizens’ forum that has focused on herbicide use.

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