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Guest Viewpoint HHHH

County right to stop use of herbicides

By Lisa Arkin and Kenneth Welker

Published: June 29, 2008 12:00AM

We are grateful to our Lane County Board of Commissioners for voting 5-0 on June 18 to place a moratorium on roadside herbicide spray.

The decision was not arbitrary — the issue of spraying poisons on our public roads has been deliberated by the board many times and for many years. The commissioners, acting as the Board of Health, considered the growing evidence of human, animal and environmental hazards associated with the use of pesticides. Arguments limited to only the direct costs of vegetation containment ignore the real costs of disease and disrupted physiological balance with increasing pesticide exposure.

Herbicides don't stay where they are put. When sprayed on roadsides, they run off and drift into the surrounding environment, exposing people in cars, bicyclists, hikers and residential property.

These chemicals are not easily flushed from living tissue. Studies by public health experts show strong evidence that pesticide exposure harms humans, especially children.

As one example of many problems, cumulative exposure leads to increasing breast cancer risks — in particular to young women who were exposed as children. As a result of exposure men face higher rates of prostate cancer, and also face infertility issues with lower sperm counts and hormone reductions.

A study done at Stanford University School of Medicine found that the use of herbicides or weed killers in the garden, or fungicides to control mold or mildew, increases the risk of developing neurodegenerative disorders such as Parkinsonism, a risk we all will face.

Other health effects include increasing the toxic burden to autistic children. Some medical professionals believe that children with autism disorder are less able to metabolize pesticide molecules into less hazardous substances, which has the effect of intensifying the toxic response in these vulnerable children when they are exposed.

These chemicals have extremely potent effects at low doses. A series of studies done in Hood River County by the Oregon Health & Science University found that small amounts of pesticides in the environment can be detected in human blood and urine. The researchers determined that thinking, memory and spatial skills can be

impaired when people are exposed to pesticides, even at low levels.

The required government studies of toxicity are done only on the touted “active” ingredient, not the final chemical composite of pesticide sold. The pesticide product actually contains so-called inactive ingredients that remain undisclosed to the public because they are considered trade secrets. Many of the supposedly inactive proprietary substances formulated into the pesticide can increase both the final potency and toxicity over a thousand fold.

We feel that The Register-Guard’s editorial on June 22, “Last resort, no resort,” missed the point of the county’s last-resort policy by suggesting that chemicals will always be necessary at some point. The editors cited the example of invasive wild blackberry bushes that grow along roadways.

We agree that certain plants can be a problem. However, many invasive weeds, including blackberries, are able to regenerate following herbicide treatment. That is why weed prevention techniques, as required by the last-resort policy, help prevent reinfestation and stop an unending cycle of pesticide use.

The Lane County commissioners are not alone in their concern about the risks of pesticides. Other businesses and governments are taking protective action. The Canadian division of Home Depot announced that it will stop selling lawn pesticides by the end of 2008. Ontario Province, Toronto and Quebec, plus 55 other municipalities, have banned the use of pesticides for lawns.

The Lane County commissioners were responsible and wise in reaffirming public health and environmental preservation. We applaud their courage and their counting of all the costs.

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