Testing shows forestry herbicides in Triangle Lake area streams

SIUSLAW WATERSHED GUARDIANS
Triangle Lake, Oregon
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Residues of common herbicides used by the timber industry were found in all four public streams tested near Triangle Lake in the Lake Creek watershed of the Siuslaw basin, according to results released by a group of residents who conducted and paid for the tests privately after the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality reversed course and decided not to pursue testing for pesticides in the basin in 2011. The group of residents, who have called their informal group the Siuslaw Watershed Guardians, placed pesticide samplers in public streams during the spring and summer of 2011, and found atrazine, desethyl atrazine or DEA (a metabolite of atrazine) and/or hexazinone in Lake Creek, Fish Creek, Congdon Creek and Nelson Creek. Fish Creek is the only state-designated core salmon habitat stream in the watershed. One sampler placed in a small spring above Congdon Creek detected no pesticide residues.

Samplers placed in Fish Creek and in Lake Creek just above the mouth of Fish Creek had the highest levels of all three compounds. They were in the streams from April 17 to May 15, 2011. The Lake Creek sample site is downstream from Triangle Lake, the Fish Creek sample site is near the Lake Creek sample site at the mouth of Fish Creek. Atrazine and hexazinone were also found in Congdon Creek, a tributary to Lake Creek above Triangle Lake. Hexazinone was found in Nelson Creek, where the sampler tested the water from June 3 to July 3, 2011.

This is the first known sampling of public streams in the Lake Creek watershed for pesticide residues. The group used “passive” samplers called POCIS, or Polar Organic Chemical Integrative Samplers. The samplers, which simply sat in the water for four weeks, were developed by the U.S. Geological Survey, and are in use by the Oregon DEQ and throughout the world.

The group was asked to submit the data to the Oregon Health Authority and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as part of the investigation of pesticide drift in the Lake Creek watershed. The group said the data has been provided as requested, and noted that it has recently been documented that even very small amounts of certain substances can lead to damage to vulnerable humans and wildlife. They also noted that the use of atrazine has been banned in the European Union, and has resulted in pollution of many streams and wells in the U.S. According to Greg Pettit, Director of DEQ’s Laboratory and Environmental Assessment Division, atrazine has been found in about 50% of drinking water wells tested in the Willamette Valley.

The group noted that direct drift through the air was one of several possible ways these pesticides found their way to public waters. The pesticides may have been sprayed directly on the stream or its headwaters or tributaries, and many pesticides continue to spread from the target site after application through evaporation, dust or smoke.
State law requires forestry pesticide applicators to retain records for 3 years and provide them on demand when needed for a pesticide investigation. Nearly a year passed after public records requests were made before State agencies were able to provide records to the group showing which of dozens of possible chemical sprays were actually applied in the Spring of 2011. Duplicate samples collected in the spring and summer of 2011 had been carefully frozen and monitored, and once provided with these records the group was able to submit the duplicate samples for analysis and to complete the quality assurance process.

The group noted that the Bureau of Land Management, which owns a significant amount of timberland in the watershed, has not used pesticides for many years, and that the Oregon Department of Transportation had reduced its use of pesticides along Highway 36 and had in fact stopped using them in the areas near the test sites before the testing began.

Blachly residents Jan Wroncy and Gary Hale said it is time to stop considering the use of dangerous and disruptive chemicals as a tool for managing timberland. People should be employed to perform the tasks that are currently done with pesticides. For example, tree planting can be done with less site preparation, and managing competing vegetation can be performed manually or mechanically for the first 2-3 years after a clear cut area is replanted. Clear cutting a forest creates many problems and forest managers reach for pesticides as a simple but costly solution. The hidden costs of pesticide use include wildlife habitat destruction and injury to local residents.

Eron King and Justin Workman, whose whole family had positive urine tests for atrazine and 2,4-D in April, 2011, said, “This validates our concerns about the Forest Practices Act not being adequate in maintaining the water quality needed for Salmon habitat.”

Dan and Marijana Gee, organic farmers who live very close to Triangle Lake, said, "The issue of an imposed constant low level endocrine disruptive chemical pollution in our watersheds is evident. The excuses and deception are evident. There are better ways to manage the timber lands that do not impose the lessening of health and the quality of life as a gift to all. We hope that responsibility to Life and the elements that support it will be restored by the Ecological approach so needed as soon as possible."

Bobbi Lindberg, retired DEQ water quality specialist who served as the Quality Assurance Officer for the project, said that the testing shows that pesticides are making their way into public waters, including important salmon streams as well as large streams such as Lake Creek, and urged public officials to change management practices to provide incentives for pesticide-free operations and to require additional protections for people and for wildlife.

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