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Pesticide petition grows

Glen Canyon Park neighbors lead drive to ban city's use of herbicide in natural areas

By Lizzie Johnson

For a while, it seemed, the notices were everywhere in Glen Canyon Park. First, they were stapled near the walking path. Then they were tacked to trees around the baseball diamond and staked into the ground. "Notice, herbicide application," they said in capital letters. Jill Fehrenbacher, who walks her two sons to school near the Glen Canyon Park, would rush the boys past and try not to think about their little hands playing in the grass. She didn't understand why San Francisco's Recreation and Park Department was using the herbicide Glyphosate in a place where dogs nosed through the grass and bushes and children played. She still doesn't understand, and neither do more than 7,000 people who have signed a petition neighbors are planning to submit to city officials asking them to ban its use.

"It's just not worth the risk to endanger the health of our kids, our pets and ourselves," she said. "Really, anyone who is in the canyon could be exposed to it. My interpretation is it's just laziness because it would be so easy for Rec and Park to explore other options."

Neighbors' complaints

But Glyphosate herbicides, which are marketed by Monsanto under the names Roundup or AquaMaster, continue to be some of the most common chemicals used by Rec and Park. It's also the chemical of choice for its Natural Areas program, which seeks to preserve and restore San Francisco's indigenous nature.

Last spring, the World Health Organization found that the chemical was "probably carcinogenic." And in July, the San Francisco Department of the Environment reclassified the chemical from Tier II, more hazardous, to Tier I, most hazardous. Yet within the last three months, Roundup was sprayed at Twin Peaks, McLaren Park, Bernal Hill, Billy-goat Hill and Corona Heights, among other city parks.

The herbicide application in Glen Canyon Park, which was intended to stop growth on eucalyptus tree stumps, was stopped after neighborhood complaints. But last year, Glyphosate was used in the park four times to target fennel, poison oak, Himalayan blackberry, cotoneaster and Cortaderia jubata, or pampas grass.

Herbicides are used as a last resort and warning signs must be posted, said Chris Geiger, municipal toxics reduction coordinator for the Department of the Environment. Broadcast spraying on city properties is not allowed, he said, and the chemical is used in small quantities. If sprayed in natural areas, personnel must wait for the product to dry before leaving.

"The majority of our use of Roundup and products like it are for difficult situations where there's an invasive plant that is very difficult to control any other way," he said. "One of the problems when you're looking at chemical alternatives is that there are really not many others to choose from that do what Glyphosate does. Some herbicides are safer, for sure, but they don't take out the plant's roots."

Glyphosate could be removed from the city's approved list by early next year, Geiger said. It's part of a program, called integrated pest management, by the city to reduce the use of herbicides and pesticides. Since 2003 the use of the chemicals has dropped by nearly 80 percent.

Natural agents sought

But some residents say that's still not enough. They're pushing for more natural agents, such as vinegar or soap, to be used or for invasive plants to be removed by hand. In 2014, Rec and Park used herbicides 174 times, and 79 times in natural areas. In 2013, they were used 202 times, and 74 times in natural areas.

"Herbicides are more toxic and more persistent than the public realizes," said Rupa Bose, vice president of the San Francisco Forest Alliance, a nonprofit that supports the city's nature. "We're especially concerned about the natural areas where the public doesn't expect herbicides. These are places where people gather blackberries, kids nibble on oxalis and dogs eat grass."

Victoria Hamman, who lives near Glen Canyon Park, says she lost her 8-year-old dog to an oral cancer in September.

The mutt, named Barack after Barack Obama, loved to fetch tennis balls in the park. Hamman speculates that Roundup caused his cancer.

Eating a plant with Glyphosate on it isn't a healthy choice for a pup's dinner, but it likely won't cause cancer, said Robert Poppenga, veterinary toxicologist at the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

"There is no peer-reviewed literature right now suggesting that there is a correlation," he said. "There are some epidemiological studies that relate bladder cancer to some types of herbicides. But as far as herbicides go, as long as they're being used according to direction, your pet should be OK."

'So unnecessary'

Carolyn Plakias, a Glen Park neighbor, said she wants to see the city at zero percent, meaning herbicides are not used anywhere

"It all seems so unnecessary," she said. "You can make yourself crazy if you start thinking about the impacts of that stuff too much. The places that they are spraying, there's nothing growing there, or it could easily be pruned by hand. We're one of the most ecologically responsible cities in the country. It's a shame we are still reliant on herbicides."

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Photos by Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

A man and his dog cross the baseball field at Glen Canyon Park. An herbicide is occasionally applied in the park.



A notice by a neighbor, who says her dog died from herbicide exposure, has been posted in the park in San Francisco.



Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

H. Joseph Ehrmann helps daughter Ruby (right) and her friend Mia Blumenberg at Glen Canyon Park.