

Pesticide Update

by Ann Thomas

County Supervisors in June approved \$100,000 funding to begin a two-year educational outreach initiative to reduce private use of pesticides in the community. Work will begin this fall and complement the County stormwater program's (MCSTOPPP) effort to educate landscapers and applicators about non-toxic pest control methods.

A full-court press on public pesticide use is overdue. Anti-pesticide activists (pesticides include herbicides) have focused protests on county and water district lands where herbicides are sparingly used to protect natural habitat and reduce fire risk. Private use—which is far greater—has had insufficient attention.

For more than two decades Marin County Parks and Open Space personnel have incrementally and significantly reduced pesticide use on County properties and in buildings owned and leased by the County. Pesticides applied on County properties, however, are less than one percent of the county total and are applied under the auspices of trained applicators. The general public, on the other hand, may unwittingly dispense dosages far exceeding what is needed and without the safety measures routinely employed by trained staff. The activists' approach has not led to any meaningful reduction in overall herbicide use, but harms biodiversity and increases risk of fire.

Last year activists successfully lobbied both Marin Municipal Water District and County Parks to curtail the use of herbicides for maintenance of natural habitat. Protestors pointed to the addition of glyphosate to the World Health Organization (WHO) list of probable human carcinogens, a distinction shared with red meat, wine, and hairdressing chemicals. This list indicates potential hazard, without specifying exposures or doses needed to create risk. It means that care must be taken in its use, but not does justify a ban.

Responding to the International Agency on Cancer Research's (IARC) listing of glyphosate, the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization and WHO held a meeting in May 2016 which concluded that glyphosate is unlikely to pose a carcinogenic risk to humans from exposure through the diet. Although food crops are not the main issue in Marin County, some people objecting to herbicides have expressed concern that herbicides could enter the water supply or children could ingest herbicide if they touched treated plants.

County and water district land managers rely on integrated pest management (IPM), a common-sense decision framework combining manual and biological controls, using least-toxic chemicals and these only as a last resort when other methods fail or are not feasible. One result of careful chemical use is to eventually eradicate or reduce the pest population to the point that only manual methods are needed.

Friends recommends the use of IPM designed by qualified professionals for invasive plant infestations in Marin County wildlands, and strongly opposes proposals to eliminate any of these techniques as tools in IPM strategies. Subsequent to the vociferous protests against any pesticide use that erupted last year at water district and county meetings, Friends joined with several other groups to advocate for use of IPM on Marin County natural habitat areas. Information can be found at www.savemarinsnaturalhabitats.org.

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