

Valley & State

ROOT CONCERN

Pesticide-free parks pose challenges

Ashland could learn from Lincoln City's experiences with banning use of chemicals

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Lincoln City's move three years ago to eliminate pesticides in its parks was going smoothly until this spring.

That's when people noticed a surge of weed growth because the lingering effects of herbicides had worn off, said Lincoln City Parks and Recreation Department Director Ron Ploger.

"This year during the months of February, March and April, we spent 260 staff hours with people on their hands and knees weeding," he said.

Back when the department was applying chemical pesticides, parks workers would spend 60 hours during those three months treating weeds, Ploger said.

The coastal town's experience in going pesticide-free may offer lessons for Ashland.

On May 24, the Ashland Parks and Recreation Commission will consider whether to adopt a new policy directing the Ashland Parks and Recreation Department to "work to reduce or eliminate" the use of pesticides. The commission meets at 7 p.m. in the Ashland Civic Center, 1175 E. Main St.

Ploger said this spring's heavy growth of weeds didn't come as a surprise.

Based on his past experiences, a consultant Lincoln City hired to help with a parks master plan warned of heavy weed growth in the third year of going pesticide-free, Ploger said.

Ploger said his parks department hasn't saved much money from not purchasing chemicals, since they're relatively inexpensive.

The department added an extra half-time worker to help deal with weeds, but still can't keep up.

It has had to neglect tasks ranging from manicuring trees to pressure-washing and painting trash cans, he said.

"Those things have had to take a back seat to weeding," he said.

Ploger compared weeding to painting the Golden Gate Bridge. It has to be done constantly and the work never ends. He said the Lincoln City parks department probably will change landscaping beds from designs with clumps of single plants to designs with spreading ground cover to prevent weed growth.

The department has had marginal success using wine vinegar acid, a byproduct of the wine industry, to kill weeds before they grow. The acid can burn the eyes and skin of workers, so they have to wear protective masks and suits, Ploger said.

"It's a tough one. People don't like the sound of using chemicals, but some studies have found that organic pesticides are more dangerous. They think they're safer because they're organic, but some organic-based pesticides are more toxic to humans and the environment than regular pesticides," Ploger said.

Corn meal gluten was supposed to prevent weed regrowth, but nitrogen in the gluten actually promoted weeds, the department found.

Lincoln City hasn't tried to rely on volunteers to do manual weeding because volunteers tend to be enthusiastic at first, but then the work eventually shifts back to staff, Ploger said.

In Ashland, residents who are advocating for pesticide-free parks have said they will help with manual weeding. A local Soroptimist Club, a service group for women, agreed in April to adopt Garden Way Park so that it can become pesticide-free.

For the past decade, the Ashland parks department has received weeding help from volunteers in places such as Glenwood Park.

Lithia Park is already pesticide-free from the children's playground on down to the entrance, said Ashland Parks and Recreation Director Don Robertson.

Both parks departments in Lincoln City and Ashland avoid using herbicides in large lawn areas by testing the soil, using lime fertilizer and setting mower blades higher to allow grass to crowd out competing weeds, Robertson and Ploger said.

The Lincoln City parks department stopped using insecticides to kill crane flies, the larvae of which eat grass roots, Ploger said.

"We let the seagulls peck at them and eat the larvae," he said.

The change has been good for people and the environment, Ploger said.

"Insecticides are indiscriminate killers. They kill beneficial nematodes and earthworms," he said.

While the move to go pesticide-free has been citizen-led in Ashland, Ploger said in Lincoln City, it was parks staff members who went to the parks board and the Lincoln City Council to inform them that parks would become pesticide-free.

Parks staff members warned Lincoln City officials that some areas might not look as nice, or might suffer from pests, but parks board and City Council members were very supportive, according to Ploger.

The parks department did reserve the right to use pesticides on invasive plants such as Japanese knotweed, which can grow back from even a scrap of root and ruin wetlands, he said.

Lincoln City's master plan consultant predicted the parks department would reevaluate its decision to go pesticide-free three years after making the change, Ploger said.

That prediction also has proven accurate.

Ploger said parks staff members plan to return to Lincoln City officials to tell them the parks department is going to start using pesticides again in some areas.

Ploger said the department will use pesticides on Highway 101 medians, since it's not safe to have workers weeding when tourist drivers are gawking at the ocean and local businesses.

Parks workers also will start spraying weed-killing herbicides in places such as planter boxes and along curbs. But they will not spray lawns and playgrounds where kids and adults recreate, Ploger said.

He said cutting pesticides has caused more work for the parks department, but on the whole, it has been a positive step for Lincoln City.

Even after parks workers start using pesticides again in some areas, there will still be a reduction in overall pesticide use compared to several years ago, Ploger said.

"We have a 380-acre park system. We estimate we will apply pesticides to less than one acre after we modify our practices," he said.

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