

Cancer society worried as Calgary revives use of herbicides to fight weeds

Herbicide ban discarded to battle invasion

BY RICHARD CUTHBERTSON, CALGARY HERALD MARCH 28, 2011



Problem weeds in Calgary include Scentsless Chamomile (shown) as well as Canada Thistle, Purple Loosestrife and Yellow Toadflax.

Photograph by: Archive, Calgary Herald

CALGARY — Noxious weeds took advantage of city hall's 2008 moratorium on herbicides and are now forcing the city to revive its chemical battle against nasty invasive plants in parks and along roads.

This is according to city environment and pest management officials in light of a 60 per cent jump last year in herbicide use by the City of Calgary as it wrestled against problem weeds, which damage ecology and road infrastructure.

"It's one of those things where you're damned if you do, you're damned if you don't," said David Day, the city's director of environmental and safety management.

But that jump in herbicide use is worrying some on council. And the Canadian Cancer Society says the potential health risks are too high to justify using chemicals to control invasive plant species.

There is a "significant and continuously growing body of evidence" that pesticides are linked to some cancer, said Evie Rodway, public policy analyst with the cancer society. The organization opposes the use, except when it protects human health, such as spraying against West Nile virus.

"If there's no countervailing health benefit here, then we wouldn't support the use to control these weeds," Rodway said.

But the hike in herbicides is also being connected to changes last year to the Alberta Weed Control Act and related regulations, a naughty list which has dramatically increased the number prohibited plants from seven to 46.

The new list has put greater obligations on the city to control various species. Prohibited plants must be destroyed. The list also includes 29 noxious plants, which must be controlled.

Problem weeds here in Calgary include Canada Thistle, Scentless Chamomile, Purple Loosestrife and Yellow Toadflax, which, if left unchecked, threaten to overrun local parks and interfere with road pavement.

The city is caught in a dilemma, Day said. He acknowledges those who raise the cancer fear, but if the city abandons herbicide as part of a "modest" program, invasive species can run roughshod through ecosystems, pushing out other plants and the animals that depend on them.

Last year's herbicide use is still 30 per cent less than 2007, when the city used 3,566 kilograms of active ingredient. Major flooding in 2005 created a huge problem with noxious weeds, leading to a significant herbicide program to bring it under control, Day said.

That increase prompted worries about how much the city was spraying. In 2008, herbicide use dropped dramatically to just 981 kilograms of active ingredient. But since then, there's been a resurgence in weeds, according to James Borrow, the city's integrated pest management lead.

"When you look at that assessment data, you see really quite quickly that many park spaces are above accepted threshold levels (for invasive species)," he said.

But Ald. Druh Farrell worries not enough is being done to promote alternatives to herbicides, such as naturalizing areas with hardy species that can resist the threat from invasive plants.

"We should be concerned when we see such a significant increase," Farrell said. "We do have a noxious weed problem, and we are required to address it . . . however, success to me means using alternative methods whenever possible."

City of Calgary use of pesticide (almost all of which is herbicide) is still a fairly small proportion of total use in Calgary. In 2009, roughly 15,000 kilograms of pesticide active ingredient was sold in Calgary, of which 70 per cent was herbicide, according to Alberta Environment.

Last year's count is not yet available, but it could well diverge from earlier years. That's because the province banned the use of weed and feed beginning Jan. 1, 2010. The combination product made up almost half the herbicide sales the year before.

The city would love to use much less pesticide, Day said. The problem is there are some plants are so persistent that "you can whack it down 10 times a year and you still got this root problem."

The only resort to get rid of them, he said, is chemical.

He argues city council and Calgarians need to agree on base program for these noxious plants. If you don't go after them every year, they will get away from you, forcing even greater use of pesticide.

"You're using more pesticides the next year because there aren't enough people in Calgary to go out and manually wander through wetlands and collect that stuff," Day said.

rcuthbertson@calgaryherald.com

© Copyright (c) The Calgary Herald

