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Feds close to finalizing revised herbicide spraying program

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The Bureau of Land Management is close to finalizing a revision to policies covering herbicide spraying on public lands that would add four new chemicals to the list of approved substances, remove six older chemicals from use and increase the amount of acreage that could be treated.

The proposal, however, has run into protests from environmental groups critical of the use of herbicides because they could harm plants and animals outside the targeted spraying areas.

The final comment period on BLM's 1,000-page programmatic environmental impact statement on the use of herbicides on public land expired this week. The agency is expected to approve the document by the end of this month, according to BLM spokeswoman Heather Feeney.

The EIS proposes that BLM increase the amount of land that can annually be treated with herbicides from the current authorized 300,000 acres to 932,000 acres over 17 Western states -- including Alaska -- using 14 chemicals already in use and four new ones. The purpose of the expanded program is to reduce the risk of wildfires on public land, which has increased astronomically since the 1970s and 1980s when herbicide spraying was originally proposed, according to the document.

The source of increased wildfire risk is the rise of invasive and noxious weeds such as cheat grass and various types of thistles and flaxes, which are an ample source of hazardous fuel on an estimated 35 million acres of public land, according to BLM. The last time BLM assessed its use of vegetation control methods was during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the agency said.

"Invasive vegetation and noxious weeds degrade or reduce soil productivity, water quality and quantity, native plant communities, wildlife habitat, wilderness values, recreational opportunities and livestock forage and are detrimental to the agriculture and commerce of the U.S. and to public health. Weed infestations can become permanent if left untreated," BLM said in the proposed EIS.

The four new herbicides being added to the approved chemicals list are diquat, fluridone, imazapic and diflufenzopyr. They join well-known chemicals such as dicamba, chlorsulfuron and sulfometuron methyl on the list of tools BLM is able to use to kill invasive weeds.

Some of the chemicals on the list could be used for aerial spraying projects and many of them are non-selective, meaning that they are not designed by their manufacturers to kill only

weeds and not non-native plants, according to BLM project manager and proposed rule overseer Brian Amme.

Also, the proposed EIS states that several of the chemicals on the list are known groundwater contaminants and would pose risks to terrestrial and aquatic vegetation. "Accidental spills and herbicide drift from treatment areas could be particularly damaging to non-target vegetation, including croplands and other vegetation found on privately owned lands near treatment areas," the document states.

"Some of the herbicides proposed [for use] have the potential to dramatically impact plants outside the spray area," said Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides spokeswoman Kay Rumsey. "For example, picloram was reregistered over the objections of EPA's own Ecological Effect Branch who cited risk to plants even at a distance from the spray area. Picloram is not only highly toxic to plants, but it's also very persistent in soil and easily moves into water sources."

Alternatives sought

Sagebrush Sea Campaign Director Mark Salvo, whose group has led the charge against the BLM proposal since it was first initiated in 2001, said that the program the agency is pushing does not address the real reasons why noxious and invasive weeds are spreading and posing more of a wildfire risk every year. Sustained soil disturbances on public lands from oil and natural gas drilling, off-road vehicles and livestock grazing is the source of the problem, he said.

Cutting back on those uses of the acreage combined with a limited program of herbicide spraying provides the government with the best long-term, holistic solution to weed control, Salvo added. "We have said since beginning that the plans and documents BLM is using are too narrowly focused on attempting to manage the effects of invasive species spread and fire fuel density without addressing the causes of invasive species and fire fuel build up," he said.

"We have submitted an alternative plan describing the very best science and its prescription for management on public lands. But BLM has taken the position that those recommendations outside of the plan are not worth considering and have instead selected a very traditional program that relies chiefly on herbicides," Salvo said.

The alternative plan was endorsed by 43 other environmental groups such as the Center for Biological Diversity and the Western Watersheds Project during several of the proposed EIS's many public comment periods.

BLM's Amme responded to the criticism, saying that Congress asked the agency in the recently approved National Fire Plan and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 to increase the scope of its work to prevent wildfires on public lands. In order to do so, the agency is considering many methods of weed prevention and eradication that do not all involve herbicide spraying, such as controlled burns and integrated pest management.

Also, it is incorrect for environmental groups to assume that the government is annually going to spray 932,000 acres with toxic chemicals, Amme said. He denied that spraying will increase. "If anything, we're just going to continue doing the same work we've always been doing, just with a larger amount of land to look over," he said. "A lot of groups submitting comments saying that we should stop all energy development on public lands to prevent the spread of these weeds have a very narrow, simplistic view of the world."