

Residents push for spraying notification law

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PEORIA, Ill. — Donna Sturm heard helicopter after helicopter flying low over the river bluff near her home.

She thought maybe Caterpillar Inc. was holding a VIP meeting at its Mossville facility, and people were flying in by helicopter.

"Then when I saw the vegetation under the power lines die off so quickly, it was upsetting," Sturm said.

Her background in horticulture and landscape design helped her piece together what had happened. She and other residents near Singing Woods Nature Preserve later learned that AmerenCILCO had dropped herbicides by helicopter in August on the power lines adjacent to their properties.

A company spokesman initially said the utility followed its policy to notify nearby residents of its plans to apply herbicides and give them an option to request the company remove vegetation manually. He later confirmed that policy was violated.

A number of longtime residents of the area said they have never been notified in advance and given an option to request manual cut-back versus chemical spraying.

Jim Christopher, a former Peoria County Board member, said the high voltage power line runs through one corner of his property, and he was not notified prior to the herbicide application by helicopter in August.

"Spraying by helicopter can drift and do a lot of damage," he said. "I want CILCO to know if they had a problem, I'd have gone out with my chain saw and cleared. I'm concerned about chemical drift."

Neal Johnson, spokesman for AmerenCILCO, initially declined to disclose what combination and concentration of chemicals was applied.

"We are a privately held company. This is an environmentally conscious way ... a safe and responsible way" to remove vegetation, he said.

Johnson later revealed the chemical blend and insisted it was a combination no more toxic than Roundup used by many homeowners.

Currently, there is no legal requirement in Illinois to notify nearby landowners before chemicals are applied to fields and vegetation. That may change if Illinois Sen. David Koehler, D-Peoria, wins support for a mandatory registry and notification law he plans to introduce in the Legislature in February.

Koehler's bill will cover both aerial and ground application. He is hoping for passage in May, but he doesn't expect implementation until the 2011 growing season.

"If it doesn't pass, we'll come back with this the following year," Koehler said.

Acknowledging violation of his company's policy, Johnson said, "It's a good thing to mandate pre-notification. It's a good idea to make it law."

Jim Chilsen, spokesman with Citizens Utility Board, said ComEd stirred up controversy in August when it cut and sprayed under power lines in several communities around Wilmette and Northbrook without prior notification.

"The utilities could have done a better job. The companies owe their customers an explanation of their actions," Chilsen said. "It's only fair that Ameren tell its customers what kind of plant-killing chemicals it's using and to answer all questions about those chemicals. Clearly, the public has a right to know."

Sturm, owner of Ancient Prairie Habitat, is no ingenuer when it comes to herbicides and pesticides.

"I'm not against chemicals, but in this case I can't believe how they were used. I thought, 'What the heck!' " Sturm said.

When she contacted the company to complain, she was told all nearby residents had been notified in advance, and she may have been missed if she recently moved to the property.

"I said there has been a Sturm here since the 1890s. The name on this property has not changed, and we don't expect a chemical cocktail to be dripping from the sky," she said. "I work from home. We received no letter, no e-mail and no phone call."

She said the best outcome from this incident would be a law mandating pre-notification.

Another concern Sturm has is pollution of a pond and lake in the area.

"People camp and swim. We caught bluegill from the pond and ate it," she said. "They shouldn't be allowed to spray near water."

A stream that cuts through Singing Woods Nature Preserve is considered one of the purest in Illinois. The Peoria Park District owns Singing Woods Nature Preserve, and district executive director Bonnie Noble said the Peoria Park District was not notified prior to the chemical application.

AmerenCILCO ultimately released the ingredients in the chemical blend. It included the herbicides RangerPro, Polaris AC, Milestone, Escort XP, Summit 910 and Nufilm IR.

Labels for all of those chemicals carry the "caution" designation, the lowest toxicity level, said Mike Ingram, owner of Prairie and Woodland Restoration Services.

Ingram does extensive work for the state and uses Roundup in certain natural areas, but he never mixes herbicides, he said.

Mixing chemicals can create new chemicals and can heighten toxicities, according to Sandra Steingraber, an environmental scientist and author.

Karl Tupper, a scientist with Pesticide Action Network, said, "Unfortunately, the utility company is correct when it says there is no legal obligation to tell people what chemicals were used. But people should have a right to pre-notification of the application and what is to be applied. Every week we are seeing more information on damage from pesticides on the ecosystem. We support a robust right to know."

John Mullen, chief naturalist with Forest Park Nature Center, lives on Singing Woods Road in a home owned by the Peoria Park District.

Mullen said he was not notified prior to the spraying.

"I'm conservative economically and environmentally as a land manager," he said. "We're all downstream or downwind from somewhere. What makes this country great is our ability to have access to information and policymakers. ... If the public doesn't know what was sprayed and can't find out, that's a spooky scenario."

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