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Pesticide opponents see greener way to kill weeds: goats

For Estelle Hjertaas, a whiff of herbicide can ruin her day.



ARTHUR WHITE-CRUMMEY/DAILY HERALD Estelle Hjertaas , upset about spraying near her Central Avenue office, said she supports the plan to use goats to eat weeds.

“I have chemical sensitivity,” she said. “I react to toxic substances at a lower level than most other people... it feels like my skin is burning.”

That’s only the first symptom, she said. Sometimes she gets headaches, fatigue or even physical tremors.

On Wednesday, Hjertaas was walking by 10 Street West when she saw a city worker spraying the sidewalk. She’s upset that she didn’t see any signs warning pedestrians about the chemicals.

“You’re walking right through it,” she said. “I would rather the city look at alternatives and not use pesticides. But if they’re going to, they should at least put up signs to make sure that people are aware.”

Hjertaas is one of a handful of residents who’ve brought their concerns to Evert Botha. The city councillor wants Prince Albert to move away from spraying. He’s even floating an ambitious plan to replace chemical herbicides with a herd of goats, roaming around city lands and eating up unwanted weeds.

“We have discussed the goats at council in recent months, and I do believe that there is a business case,” he said. “If we can use nature to control nature, then why not?”

Botha isn't calling for a city-owned herd of goats. He wants administration to hire a herdsman to graze his flock on city land. He thinks the hardy ruminants will clean up the weeds in no time.

“Goats will literally eat anything,” he said. “If it's green and it's alive then they will eat it... It would be great to see these little critters running around the city.”

Until that happens, if it ever does, Botha wants to see the city do more to keep residents informed about where and when they spray.

“First and foremost, we can communicate in advance,” he said. “Members of the public are exposed to it if there's a light breeze or they're in close proximity. Proper signage can help to ensure that we're not getting pesticide on residents.”

The city recently set up a webpage to provide updates on where workers have recently sprayed. But Hjertaas is troubled that the notifications often show up days later, after she's already been exposed. Botha said the city should use social media to make sure the information goes out beforehand.

“We can do it with lane closures,” he said, “so I don't see why we can't do that with pesticides.”

City spokesperson Alanna Adamko said the administration tries to update the webpage as frequently as possible. She said they ordinarily place signs 24 hours before spraying. That works well for green spaces like parks, but it's a bit more difficult for hard surfaces like sidewalks.

“We can't use the lawn signs on a sidewalk,” she said. “We're looking at potential different signage options.”

She said the city only uses products that are “completely approved and safe for human use.”

Botha said he's raised his concerns with the city manager's office. He's pleased about the webpage, but said the city can “still do better.”

“Whatever poisonous chemicals we can replace with natural and biodegradable alternatives, I would be a key proponent of that,” he said.

Adamko said the city has no immediate plans to change its policies. She said that Hjertaas is in a distinct minority. The city hears from far more residents asking for more aggressive action against weeds.

“We get way more calls and email calling us asking us to spray more,” she said.