

'It's a dead forest': northern bush pilot, First Nations decry herbicide spraying



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Aerial spraying of herbicides in Ontario



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An environmental lawyer in Foleyet has spent almost 20 years asking Ontario to stop spraying chemical herbicides over provincial forests.

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TIMMINS -- A bush pilot, hunting outfitter and environmental lawyer in Foleyet has spent almost 20 years asking the provincial government to stop spraying chemical herbicides over Ontario forests. Joel Theriault claims the chemical it uses to help with forest renewal, glyphosate, damages the environment and local wildlife. He said years of flying over Crown land paints a stark picture. "A year before (the spraying), I could fly that same area and I could see a dozen moose and a dozen bears every flight," said Theriault.

"After the spray happens, I wouldn't see an animal there for five years."

Theriault is concerned that wild game may eat vegetation or smaller prey doused with the chemical, then affect people's health when hunted. He worries the herbicides also seep into water sources.

Managing forest regrowth

The province banned glyphosate for use on people's lawns and gardens, but the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) uses it to control weeds and brush so it can replant softwood trees after harvesting. It works in tandem with forestry companies to manage Crown forests.

In a statement to CTV, the ministry wrote:

"Herbicides are only used when necessary to renew the forest, which usually amounts to less than 0.2% of the province's productive forested area. The Pest Management Regulatory Agency has determined (glyphosate) does not present unacceptable risks to human health or the environment when used as directed."

Forestry companies and associations we reached out to for comment on aerial herbicide spraying either did not respond or declined to comment on the topic.

The MNRF is renewing its forest management plans for its different zones across the province, but First Nations communities have been calling for them to phase out the spraying of chemicals.

First Nations call for herbicide ban

Flying Post First Nation recently passed a resolution condemning aerial herbicide spraying in the north, as the province works to finalize its Pineland forest management plan, which spans Chapleau, Timmins, and Gogama.

A member of that community and forest technician, Troy Woodhouse, said the spraying has a noticeable impact on his community's traditional land.

"It's a silent bush you're walking through," Woodhouse said.

"You can tell it's a dead forest after. Everything that was in that area has left."

First Nations communities in the Temiskaming area also opposed glyphosate spraying as part of the MNRF's management plan for that area's forest.

It issued a letter asking the practice stop and that its communities share in the economic benefit.

Emails obtained by CTV show regulatory officials stating that residue left on vegetation should not harm wild game and they would be safe for humans to hunt after three days, based on agricultural research.

The province also alerts people when aerial sprays occur and posts signage around the coverage areas.

But with conflicting scientific studies over whether glyphosate causes cancer in animals and humans, Theriault and Woodhouse believe it is not worth the risk.

"I think we all have the right to clean drinking water and we all have the right to harvest animals on our traditional land, free of chemicals," said Woodhouse.

Other provinces limiting forest spraying

While calls for Ottawa to ban glyphosate nationwide have gone unanswered, other provinces like Nova Scotia and British Columbia have been making steps to reduce aerial herbicide spraying, after protests against the practice.

The prime example for Canadian Environmental Law Association lawyer Kerrie Blaise is Quebec's decades-old approach to forest management.

"They actually banned a strain of glyphosate in 1994 and not only did they substitute aerial spraying with new forest management practices, they got rid of herbicide spraying altogether," Blaise said.

Adopting similar practices like planting larger saplings to fend off competition and using more hands-on labour would reduce the potential environmental damage and create jobs, she said, albeit a more expensive option.

In addition to the health concerns, Blaise said that spraying forests to plant more coniferous trees (pine, spruce, cedar) for the lumber industry could cause more forest fires, since they burn more easily and quickly compared to broadleaf trees (aspen, birch, oak).

"Just the very subtle changes in temperature, humidity in a broadleaf forest is less conducive to fire than a conifer forest," Blaise said, which would be helpful amidst the effects of climate change.

Ministry maintains herbicide safety

The ministry did not answer whether it would adopt similar forest management policies to Quebec or look into the health and environmental concerns, but maintains that aerial herbicide spraying is safe when done correctly, as well as being more cost-effective.

Theriault, however, believes Ontario's forest management style is unacceptable and wants action before it finalizes its new plans.

He's hoping people will call or email their local MNRF branches and MPPs to push the government to stop using herbicides, in favour of more eco-friendly practices.

"The government of Ontario is clearly saying international shareholder profits are more valuable than ... the people who are being exposed to these chemicals through wildlife consumption, through drinking contaminated waters," Theriault said.

"It's an injustice that's been happening for decades."