

Monsanto's "Rain of Death" on Canada's Forests

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First Nations in Ontario have run out of patience. For 43 years, the forest industry has been conducting aerial spraying of glyphosate herbicide on Indigenous lands – a “rain of death” used in forest management practice that has slowly been killing off a wide range of animals, plants, fish and insects. First Nations have tried to stop this practice since the 1990s through a variety of measures including meetings with logging companies and government officials, protests and reports, but all to no avail. The “rain of death” keeps coming.

Now, members of the Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) Elders of the North Shore of Lake Huron say they will be going to court to force the Canadian federal government to live up to Robinson Huron Treaty of 1850. That treaty guarantees First Nations in the area the right to hunt, fish, gather berries and use plant medicines in traditional territories. The TEK Elders say that by allowing the aerial spraying to continue, the Trudeau government is violating this treaty and the Constitution Act of 1982, which reaffirms those rights.

“We’re done waiting,” Raymond Owl, one of the founding members of TEK, told the press in April. [1] Formed in 2014, the TEK Elders group is comprised of Elders from 21 bands in the area.

Sue Chiblow, a Garden River First Nation Councillor assisting the TEK Elders, has stated:

“We went to the Ministry of Natural Resources and they said ‘well no we just issued the license so that’s not our problem; it’s Health Canada’s problem’ ... So we went to Health Canada and they said ‘we don’t actually do the spraying; we’re just saying that’s it’s ok and it’s up to the companies to use or not use it’.” [2]

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry recently provided a statement to APTN News which said in part:

“Herbicide use is very limited in Ontario and they are only used when absolutely necessary – usually amounts to less than 0.2 per cent of Ontario’s forested area in any given year ... Health Canada recently re-evaluated the use of glyphosate, finding no unacceptable risks to human health or the environment when used as directed.” [3]

Health Canada is taking this stance even as Bayer-Monsanto has been losing court case after court case in the U.S. to juries awarding billions in damages to individuals harmed by the pesticide. Some 13,000 more cancer victims’ cases against Bayer-Monsanto await trial.

The TEK Elders' website (tekelders.weebly.com) states that "In Ontario, the forest management planning process begins with Crown approval for aerial spraying already in place." There has never been any consultation with First Nations on this issue. As TEK Elder Raymond Owl has stated on the website,

"The announcements for spraying are printed in local newspapers to say when and where - and that's it. We are told by Health Canada that the chemicals are safe, not harmful to humans, yet we are witness to absolute destruction of natural habitat and ecosystems."

Creating a Monoculture

The forest industry across Canada (and in parts of Oregon and Washington) has relied on aerial herbicide spraying for more than 40 years, in line with its practice of clear-cutting, followed by replanting for monocultures.

The purpose of the glyphosate and other herbicides is to wipe out the so-called "weed" species that start re-growing after clearcutting. Those species include aspen, alder, birch, oak, maple, willow and other broad-leaf plants and shrubs - all considered of less commercial value than needle-leaf softwoods like Lodgepole Pine and Douglas Fir.

Forester and Forest Ecologist Herb Hammond told me by email,

"the presence of dense 'brush' following logging is a sign of ecological degradation from logging, which is dominated by clearcutting. There is nothing natural about clearcutting," he noted, but it is "the cheapest, fastest way to turn forests into money."

So after the clearcutting, "natural processes activate restoration procedures for soil and microclimate, resulting in high densities of herbaceous and woody vegetation other than coniferous trees." These so-called "weed" species "are vital for biological diversity, building soil nutrient capital, slowing the spread of wildfire, and [they are] superior to conifers in sequestering and storing carbon - an important forest assist in this climate change world," Hammond told me.

The irony is that "conifers will emerge from under the other vegetation and will grow better over time than those trees where 'competing vegetation' was removed" by aerial spraying. But, noted Hammond, "people prescribing pesticides give little value to other life that depend upon the plants being sprayed, or the water, soil and air affected by pesticide treatments."

Also a BC Problem

According to The Prince George Daily News,

"timber companies are required by government legislation to eliminate the so-called weed trees in area they have logged or face penalties. A preferred way to accomplish this is to dump herbicide in massive doses on the land base. Manual, non-spray brushing could potentially create many more seasonal jobs in the forest. Yet that method is little utilized today." [4]

According to the NGO Stop The Spray BC, between 10,000 and 20,000 hectares of BC forests are sprayed with glyphosate and other herbicides every year, mostly in the Central Interior.

“This vast conversion of our forests from bio-diverse stands with many broadleaf species to conifer monocultures is required by law, signed off on by Registered Professional Foresters, and is supported by the Association of British Columbia Professional Foresters.”

Stop the Spray BC spokesman James Steidle states that wildlife are “incredibly dependent” on the broadleaf trees considered “weeds” by industry and government. And those same trees in a mixed forest are better at sequestering carbon and controlling wildfires. Steidle notes,

“As our planet continues to warm, biodiversity fades and forest fires grow worse, does it make sense to keep eliminating the trees with the highest biodiversity values, lower probability of flammability, and best ability to sequester CO2 and reflect solar radiation from our forests? Obviously not.” [5]

But timber companies and our provincial governments are actually spending millions every year to do precisely that.

Quebec, however, is the exception. Chemical herbicides were banned on Crown forest lands in Quebec in 2001 – about 90% of the provincial forest land base. In 2008, the Quebec government reaffirmed its commitment to ecosystem-based management of public forests. [6]

In March, the Prince George Citizen reported that B.C. MLA Mike Morris is working on a private members bill to ban the use of glyphosate on provincial forests. [7]

Stopping the Rain of Death

Clearly, the Traditional Ecological Knowledge Elders of Ontario have raised a huge issue with their pending lawsuit. SumOfUs is raising funding for their legal fees and helping to alert the wider community. The TEK Elders are also planning to contact the World Health Organization (WHO) for assistance. The WHO’s International Agency for Research on Cancer has already classified glyphosate as “probably carcinogenic to humans”. [8]

Information about the TEK Elders’ pending lawsuit also comes just days after the UN’s shocking biodiversity report, warning that one million species are at risk of extinction. That report was issued by the UN’s Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). UBC professor Kai Chan, one of the lead authors of the report, told the Toronto Star that “...the scale of change now requires us to pressure political systems and other institutions to overhaul national and global economies. ‘Nature isn’t broken. But you could say that our institutions are not fit for purpose,’ Chan says. ‘Really, what we need to do is fix them’.” [9]

That comment may be applicable to Health Canada, which seems to have been captured by Bayer-Monsanto and the pesticide industry.

The UN biodiversity report also specifically urged policy-makers “to recognize and respect Indigenous institutions, values, innovations, practices and knowledge, and to engage with and consider Indigenous communities, something they note is currently sorely lacking.” [10] The Traditional Ecological Knowledge Elders of Ontario know the brutal truth of this, and now they’re going to court. That seems to be the only way to stop the “rain of death”.

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Notes

[1] Helen Morley, “TEK Elders will take government to court,” Mid North Monitor, April 4, 2019.

[2] Quoted in Christopher Read, “Trappers in Robinson Huron treaty want aerial herbicide spraying to end,” APTN News, March 22, 2019.

[3] Quoted in Ibid.

[4] Peter Ewart, “Death from the sky in northern B.C.,” The Prince George Daily News, March 31, 2018.

[5]<http://stopthespraybc.com/>

[6] Dave Mance III, “The Great Glyphosate Debate,” Northern Woodlands, Spring 2012.

[7] Mark Nielsen, “Morris calling for ban on glyphosate in B.C. forests,” Prince George Citizen, March 7, 2019.

[8] Read, op. cit.

[9] Quoted in Kate Allen, “One million species face possibility of extinction, report warns,” Toronto Star, May 6, 2019.

[10] Ibid.

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