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Buffelgrass spraying at Saguaro National Park starts Monday



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A low-flying helicopter will spray herbicide on invasive buffelgrass in rugged terrain at Saguaro National Park beginning Monday, Aug. 24, and continuing through Aug. 30, park officials said.

The spraying of a glyphosate-based herbicide will be done on Panther Peak in the park's district west of Tucson and at multiple locations in the southwestern portion of the district east of the city as the weather permits.

The goal is to limit the spread of buffelgrass, a highly flammable and rapidly growing African grass introduced into the United States in the early 1900s to control erosion and feed cattle. It outcompetes native vegetation and threatens to alter the park's landscape.

A group called the Avra Valley Coalition — maintaining that aerial spraying of glyphosate can sicken people and cause diseases including cancer — plans a protest at 8:30 a.m. Monday, Aug. 24, at the park's west district visitor center.

SECOND YEAR OF PROGRAM

"We'll actually be re-treating some areas we treated last year," which was the first year of the aerial spraying program, said **Natasha Kline**, a biologist with the park. "A lot of plants have re-sprouted" because of seeds that remained in the ground and heavy rains this summer.

Kline said more than 250 acres of park lands were treated last year for buffelgrass, and plans call for aerial treating of a similar number of acres this year. The helicopter will fly as low as safely possible to minimize "drift" of the herbicide, and some sites will be closed to the public during treatment, she said.

WIDESPREAD INFESTATION

Last year, more than 2,000 acres of buffelgrass were documented growing throughout the park, with a predicted spread rate of 10 percent to 35 percent annually, according to park officials.

"We simply cannot keep up with the growth of buffelgrass without multiple methods of treatment, including aerial treatment, said park ecologist **Dana Backer**. "Buffelgrass is monitored to ensure the effectiveness of the aerial herbicide treatment. Key plant species, such as saguaros, are also surveyed before and after aerial herbicide applications to assess potential impacts to native plants. Results from these studies, which are still being analyzed, will inform future management actions."

OPPOSITION TO SPRAYING

Members of the Avra Valley Coalition said they are protesting the planned spraying because

they believe glyphosate, the active ingredient in the commercial herbicide called Roundup, is dangerous to human health and the ecosystem in general.

“Glyphosate has been banned in a number of countries since the World Health Organization’s International Association for Research on Cancer labeled glyphosate a ‘probable carcinogen,’ ” said **Albert Lannon**, spokesman for the coalition.

Lannon maintained that “aerial spraying last year sickened nearby families and pets as safeguards did not work as planned.” Symptoms included severe headaches, he said.

Glyphosate also has been linked to killing some native plants and contributing to a decline of monarch butterflies, Lannon said.

Kline, the Saguaro Park biologist, emphasized that “we don’t take the use of herbicides lightly.”

“We try to use the least invasive methods — manual pulling of buffelgrass,” she said. “But it became so pervasive that we said we’ll have to use herbicides here.”

Kline acknowledged that “lots has been written recently about glyphosate and its toxicity.”

“But the Environmental Protection Agency has not so far changed their regulations about it,” she said. “That’s what we go by. We’re still using it until we know otherwise. It’s the least toxic of the herbicides that will kill buffelgrass. We try to have the lightest hand that we can.”

Studies are continuing, Kline said, to determine if glyphosate has detrimental effects on saguaros, other cacti and desert trees.

“But we know that animals and plants are directly affected by buffelgrass,” she said. “They are being crowded out.”