

June 8, 2006

Council is split over spray options for pepperweed

By Patricia M. Roth, Sonoma West Times and News

SEBASTOPOL—Vice Mayor Sam Pierce urged councilmembers to consider applying herbicide by hand on pepperweed plants in the Laguna during a city council meeting on Monday night.

“I’m concerned it’s getting away from us, said Pierce, whose recent observation of how pepperweed had “decimated” areas of the Laguna led to his decision to move away from using alternative methods to keep the invasive perennial plant at bay.

Applying herbicide by hand would be labor intensive but reduce herbicide by 90 percent, when compared to spraying, he noted.

His suggestion was met with resistance by at least one councilmember, Craig Litwin, who wanted to continue to argue the merits of non-spraying, and Sebastopol activist Magick, who warned about the dangers of applying the chemical telar near waterways and said its toxins were dangerous to the public.

Last year the council supported using alternative approaches to eradicate pepperweed in the Laguna, launching more than 100 community volunteers as well as councilmembers into action. Volunteers adopted plots of land, organized work parties, pulled plants by hand, applied sheet mulch and more. Their efforts prompted the city council to issue a proclamation of appreciation to volunteers last fall.

Now that the pepperweed has returned en masse, Pierce said time’s running out and warned of plants going to seed and spreading even more. He urged the council to walk the more than 30 sites that were documented in the Laguna last fall and note the plant’s comeback.

Councilmember Larry Robinson said this year marks his third spring of observing pepperweed in the Laguna. “I’m concerned we’re losing ground,” he said. He told the council, “Do not let ideology trump responsibility for being good stewards of the land.”

The discussion about pepperweed was prompted by a status report given by Richard Emig, superintendent of the Sebastopol Public Works Department.

The department used three alternative pepperweed removal practices on six sites, repeating the practice twice for accuracy. Last October, they mowed, scraped and disked patches of pepperweed then covered the areas with black plastic and left them for the winter.

On May 23, when the grounds had dried well enough to drive a vehicle into the area, they took a look.

“Mowing was the least effective. Pepperweed was protruding from the two mowed sites,” said Emig. The other sites were “more effective, but the plants still had a root system,” he said.

On May 23, Emig said they sprayed the sites and their perimeters with an all-natural clove oil and will be checking its effectiveness on a regular basis.

Pierce said the council must “look at every opportunity to support the work” of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, which is charged with caring for the largest freshwater wetlands on the North Coast. Infiltration of pepperweed could jeopardize the foundation’s ability to obtain funding for their work, which he called “visionary.”

“The Foundation brought this before us last year and we wanted to attempt an alternative solution. We tried to do that without using herbicides. We need to move on. The scale of the problem is way beyond our capacity to attempt novel approaches,” he said after the meeting.

Dan Schurman, executive director of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, said he shared the vice mayor’s concern. “Pepperweed can wipe out biodiversity in a handful of seasons,” he told councilmembers.

“It has the potential to wipe out the biodiversity of the Laguna. The Laguna is a biodiversity hot spot, and that’s what we should be working to preserve,” said Schurman.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation is close to embarking on a restoration project along the Laguna between Highway 12 and Occidental Road called the Middle Reach Restoration Project. This area includes property located in Sebastopol. It’s the first project recommended in the Laguna Ecosystem Restoration and Management Plan, to be soon released.

Magick, who has helped lead community volunteers involved in the pepperweed program in the Laguna, urged the council to keep Sebastopol “a pesticide-free zone.” She said the community’s attempt to remove pepperweed was a first effort “and we’re learning.”

When expressing her concern about toxins, she reported that a new group for people with chemical sensitivities had recently formed in Sebastopol and that a woman had become sick after walking in an area in the Laguna that had been sprayed.

Later she said Sebastopol “should be at the forefront and leading the way to natural means ... they’re saying it won’t go in the air. It would still go into the environment and we don’t know what these chemicals do.”

After the meeting, Litwin said he was confident there are ways to restore native habitats, eliminate invasives and bring balance back to the ecosystem without using chemical sprays.

The community must step forward, he stressed. "If you look to other jurisdictions, it costs less money to apply chemical pesticides than to hire physical labor. If Sebastopol wants a chemical-free environment, they must step forward to work on controlling the pepperweed in a nontoxic way."

The community would also need to raise about \$15,000 to hire a volunteer coordinator to oversee the removal of pepperweed, said Litwin. Anyone who wishes to help out or make a donation may contact the city.

"We need to find the best management practice for this problem," said Pierce.

"All of us would like to eliminate pesticide and herbicide use 100 percent. But we have been provided with an opportunity to demonstrate how to reduce herbicide use by 90 percent. If we can do that, and solve a host of other problems, that's a great service," he said.

Pierce agreed to join Litwin on a pepperweed subcommittee. "We're going to compare our notes, walk the site and discuss what should be a recommendation to moving forward and bring it to the council at the next meeting," he said. The next city council meeting is scheduled for June 20.

In May of 2000, Sebastopol created, through resolution, a voluntary toxics-free zone in the city aimed at reducing the use of pesticides and other toxic chemicals in the city.