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## Cape environmental group blasts Eversource plan

Pointing to recent examples of volunteers clearing unwanted vegetation with hand tools, the largest environmental nonprofit group on Cape Cod has criticized Eversource Energy's latest plan to spray herbicides on invasive and tall-growing plants in power line rights of way.

In a letter sent March 12 to John Lebeaux, commissioner of the state Department of Agricultural Resources, the Association to Preserve Cape Cod expressed concerns that the chemicals might leach into the groundwater and contaminate the region's single-source aquifer. The group argues that Eversource's alternative method of clear-cutting the rights of way with heavy machinery "can be devastating to those same sensitive habitats and rare species mentioned above."

"Clearly, there are other methods of vegetation management that can be utilized that will not introduce toxic chemicals to the environment or result in a blanket leveling of all habitats within the (rights of way)," wrote Ed DeWitt, executive director of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod.

DeWitt noted that, in recent years, the Brewster and Harwich conservation trusts have manually cleared invasive and high-growing foliage.

"Both organizations showed that undesirable vegetation can be effectively removed with a small group of volunteers using only hand tools," he wrote. "The effort achieved the same objective as Eversource's (integrated vegetation management program), but without the risk of herbicides or the destruction of clearcutting."

In an interview, DeWitt said the group wants the state Department of Agricultural Resources to force Eversource to use herbicides only as a last resort. In 2013, four years into a self-imposed moratorium, the company announced it would resume spraying herbicides, showing that it had "no creative ideas whatsoever" for managing vegetation, DeWitt said.



Vegetation Control Services worker Mark Summers uses a power sprayer to apply a herbicide to pitch pine saplings along a power line right of way in Bourne in 2013.

Steve Heaslip/Cape Cod Times file

“They came back with business as usual after taking a long time off from using chemicals,” he said.

The agriculture department has extended the comment period for the Eversource herbicide plan to May 11, 45 days from the original March 27 end date.

Eversource has repeatedly dismissed claims that the chemicals pose a danger, claiming that its herbicides are specifically designed for environmentally sensitive areas. In an email Tuesday, Eversource spokeswoman Rhiannon D’Angelo said the company has discussed proposals such as the one from the Association to Preserve Cape Cod many times, but has found that herbicides are the most effective approach to control invasive and tall-growing vegetation while promoting the low-growing native plant species.

“Our staff arborists work closely to carefully train workers on what to look for and what to avoid,” she wrote.

Eversource also noted that its vegetation management plan accounts for less than 1 percent of total herbicide use on the Cape — a point DeWitt conceded. But in a lengthier letter to the state last year, DeWitt wrote that “public utilities such as NStar play a unique role and have unique responsibilities to act in the public benefit.”

In a statement about the extension of the comment period, state Sen. Daniel Wolf, D-Harwich, wrote that Eversource is not the only organization which uses herbicides or pesticides.

“However, the company has the opportunity to serve as a model for other organizations to follow,” he wrote. “We hope to use this time to further conversations with towns, advocates, MDAR, and Eversource.”

Each of the Cape’s 15 towns has passed a nonbinding resolution in opposition to Eversource’s spraying of foliage underneath power lines. The operating plan for the upcoming year calls for spraying in all of those towns except Brewster and Provincetown.

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