

The Overuse of Herbicides at Heintz Open Space



Los Gatos, CA.

Data collected in April and May 2015
© Greg Kerekez Urban Wildlife Research Project

Heintz Open Space

Heintz Open Space is a patch of mixed Pine and Oak Woodland above the historic orchards along Blossom Hill Rd. in Los Gatos, CA. The trails are maintained by the City of Los Gatos with Herbicide 4-8 feet from the trail side, killing and damaging over 30 species of native species of Tree, Shrub, and wildflower. This document is intended to encourage the city to discontinue its use of herbicide and restore the damaged habitat. Heintz is a prime example of the bad impacts herbicides can have on our environment. There are no wildflowers blooming along the trails sides, dead trees and limbs are falling on the trails posing a safety risk to trail users. The death of the trees and plants along the trail side could destabilize the soil and increase erosion during storm events.

Residents have approached the Town on this issue and have gotten nowhere. A Los Gatos parks official said at the last beautification meeting, one reason for this herbicide spraying is to control Poison Oak, but they are killing the woodland in the process. They are not targeting specific Poison Oak plants, Los Gatos sprays the entire trail side even where no Poison Oak occurs, decimating the natural diversity of Blossom Hill. No local land agency manages poison oak in this manner because it is harmful to the environment. Although Poison Oak may present a risk to an unaware hiker it is an important part of the ecosystem and provides habitat and food to many species of wildlife. Los Gatos officials also stated at the meeting that the drought is killing the trees not the herbicides. Granted the drought has killed a few trees, our native trees are adapted to drought and other mixed pine/oak woodlands in the area, maintained by other land managers, do not show the same amount or type of damage seen trailside at Heintz. There is no doubt that Heintz's ecosystem is being affected by the overuse of Herbicide.



Dead Monterey Pine and dead poison oak surrounding

Survey of plant death and damage at Heintz O.S.

Plant Species	Dead	Damaged
Coast Live Oak	32	97
Valley Oak	6	7
Monterey Pine	20	2
Elderberry	15	5
Coffee Berry	12	5
Toyon	10	50
Coyote Bush	13	3
Buckeye	7	5
Sticky Monkey Flower	12	5
Poison Oak	27	38
Snowberry	44	0
California Sage Bush	600+	0
Buck Brush Ceanothus	18	0
Calif. Wild Cucumber	5	0
Black Walnut	1	1



On 5-1-15 I picked 15 species of flora and counted the dead and damaged plants, on the 1.4 mile main loop trail (from Blossom Hill Rd, to Valley View Trail, then Sky Trail). This is a summary of the dead plants counted along the trailside within the herbicide sprayed area: 32 Coast Live Oaks, 6 Valley Oaks, 20 Monterey Pines, 15 Elderberry Trees, 44 Snowberry Bushes, 600+ California Sage Brushes and 97 damaged Toyons.



8-10 feet of the entire trail side is sprayed, in these two photos alone there are over 600 dead young California Sage Brush plants.



Coast Live Oak sapling with herbicide damaged leaves.



Dead Elderberry Tree within herbicide sprayed area.

A Statement from the Towns' Integrated Pest Management Policy: "The Town of Los Gatos will carry out its pest management operations using **reduced-risk IPM techniques to reduce or eliminate chemicals to the maximum extent.** Chemicals will be used only as a last resort for pest management problems. Each Department that applies pesticides will maintain an active IPM plan to **ensure the long-term prevention or suppression of pest problems with minimum negative impact on human health, non-target organisms, and the environment.**"

The town is going against its own IPM Policy by overusing herbicide on a wide variety of "non-target organisms".

Our Requests for the Town of Los Gatos

- 1) Stop all herbicide use until it has reviewed all departments IPM plans and partnered with other land managers like Mid-peninsula Open Space District and Santa Clara County Open Space to gain knowledge of how to properly execute an Integrated Pest Management Plan in an open space.
- 2) Take responsibility for restoration of the forest using the same or similar native plants. (possible plant sources Acterra and Our City Forest) this will improve erosion conditions and replace the dead plants damaged by herbicide.
- 3) Strictly abide by the towns IPM policy and hold employees accountable for not following town policy.
- 4) Create and annual public report that shows how much herbicide the town uses, what kind, where, and why, releasing the first report ASAP.



Poison Oak growing back after being sprayed. Herbicide will be used again next year.



Herbicide burnt leaves of a Toyon bush a "non-target organism" being affected by herbicide.

Success Update!

After creating this document, I started a change.org petition to encourage the town to stop herbicide use. I also reached out to local conservation groups and got Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, Sierra Club's Pesticide Committee, and Community of Green Foothills to send letters to the town council encouraging them to cease the use of herbicides on their open spaces. I took town officials, activists, and residents on tours of the herbicide damaged habitat and met people who had previously expressed concern for the town's herbicide spraying. I was soon contacted by Park Officials, who expressed great concern for the condition of Heintz Open Space. They stated that a contractor was hired to maintain the trail and there was lack of oversight to the activities of the contractor. The park official assured us that the town would stop spraying herbicides and retrain their employees on proper vegetation management practices according to the town's integrated pest management(IPM) plan. There has been no herbicide spraying at Heintz since. Our groups continue to monitor the compliance of the town of Los Gatos with their IPM.