

The Public Relations of Public Spraying

By Jim Hansen

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SPRAYING SEEMS to have become a hazardous occupation. Not in the usual physical sense, of course, but with the 1972 spray season just starting, applicators who contract for a routine spray job along a highway or power line can set off enough controversy to provide some real headaches. How to avoid these headaches and how to ease the pain after they start has become a subject well worth exploring.

People today are concerned with anything that they think may have some adverse effect on the environment. Often that concern is almost totally uniformed and sometimes equally irrational, but it is real. The concern may be fanned by one of our current crop of "instant ecologists" who for reasons of personal advantage need to maintain a "tiltable windmill." Rights-of-way spray jobs or any spray work on public land fills the bill. It is visible. It comes under the domain of the "establishment," and it can be influenced by public pressure without trampling on the rights of the "little man."

This climate adds an element of risk to any spray operation that must be taken into account if normal maintenance is to continue.

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It is important that consideration of potential public relations trouble areas be as much a part of your planning as the areas on your system that present special problems of terrain or weather.

Planning to meet public relations problems will not make them disappear, but it will help you to meet them without panic and in a manner that will cause least disruption to your operations. The planning itself may indicate weak spots in your program that need attention.

Pinpoint Problem Areas: This is the first step. From a public relations standpoint this is easier than you might think. These areas can be located on the basis of:

- a) history
- b) visibility
- c) awareness
- d) factors totally unrelated to spraying

History is a good indicator of sensitive areas. Any field man can list a number of chronic complainers in his area. These are a few people who can be counted upon to be upset about something every year . . . complaints can range from noisy trucks to pole locations or road signs they don't like. It's a sure bet that these people will object to your spray program now that it has become fashionable. An area with a history of problems deserves some special attention in your planning for this season's spray program.

Visibility has a real effect on the degree of sensitivity of an area. If you are conducting a normal spray program deep within your own property or in a location remote from roads or people, the likelihood of problems is not too great. However, if you are causing "brown out" or severe die-back close to a row of suburban homes or through a local arboretum, watch out. You probably will be in for trouble. Even the presence of spray equipment in some areas of high visibility is enough to cause problems without proper planning and preparation.

Awareness is a rather nebulous idea, but it plays a role in the public relations aspects of a spray program. If in a particular area there is a rather high concentration of people active in environmental causes, you can expect a ready interest in your operations. This can pose some problems, but it can also present you with opportunities to tell your story.

If you are already involved in controversy over something else, you probably can count on some

opposition. A public utility in a rate battle, a highway department fighting over highway location, or a timber company contesting property lines is apt to hear protests over spraying. This problem cannot be solved by a public relations program surrounding your spray operation.

Plan Your Spray Program: This is the next step once potential trouble spots are located. It is a good idea to make the best of the situation in each area. This may require some soul searching such as:

- a) changing the way you evaluate particular vegetation control programs.
- b) requiring a careful look at the personnel that deal with the public and that operate the spray equipment out on the job.
- c) upgrading your efforts toward a public information program.

In some situations you may want to change your approach to vegetation control. There may be some spots so sensitive that the best solution might be to hand clear it or, you may want to consider dormant season treatment to avoid excessive (and obvious) summer browning of foliage. Spot spraying on a more frequent schedule may be the best way to approach the problem in an area of high visibility. Maximum attention to drift control is a must. The use of pelleted materials may avoid even the suggestion (real or otherwise) of drift in highly visible locations. Planning a flexible spray program to meet the varied needs of your whole system is a major part of a public relations program.

People are always key factors in your relations with the "outside world." If your people are clean, neat and act as though they know what they are doing it makes a real difference. Clean coveralls for the spray crews, fresh paint and regular wash jobs for the spray rigs will generate profit in goodwill. A professional look creates confidence . . . the idea is as old as the first patent medicine commercial, but it works.

Crew leaders need training that goes beyond the mechanics of the job. They need to know what to say when someone asks what they are doing, what kind of material they are spraying and what it does. (See *Herbicides Keep Jacksonville Drainage Ditches Open*, page 16, WTT, March 1972) Whether they are your employees or work for a contract applicator makes no difference to an interested or concerned citizen. They represent you.



Vegetation maintenance in areas of high visibility can be handled by spot spraying on a more frequent basis. Granular formulations applied in the dormant season may be the answer.

Field men or supervisors that contact home and property owners in areas adjacent to the spray job need to develop a talent for *listening* as well as *talking*. In many cases someone who raises objections just wants some questions answered. A good listener can find out what they really are and answer them. Those contacting the public for permission to spray need good back-grounding in the facts of the spray program, including information about the products to be used, their effects and why the whole job is to be done. They should also be able to give some accurate background on how spray materials are developed and the long series of safety tests that a material must pass before being used in the field.

Public information programs are
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often an area that seem perilous to someone not experienced in this field. This is not the case. The basis for a good public information program is honesty and an open attitude. Sometimes you will feel that you have been mistreated in the press, but often close examination will show you didn't really try to tell your side of the story. Most news people are reasonably objective and make an honest effort to get the facts. Unfortunately, we sometimes make those facts hard to find.

Garden clubs, conservation organizations and ecologists in your area are not the enemy. They represent a very real opportunity to get your story out.

Garden club talks are time-consuming and don't sound very important, but they can be a real route to thought leaders in a community. These people really are interested in many of the small facts that you grew tired of years ago. To them the idea that grass survives better when the brush is cleared is new.

Local newspapers can help or hurt you. The "off" season is a great time to drop in and get acquainted with the editors in your area. Make

sure they are invited to any special event you may be planning so that they know you and they know what you are trying to accomplish. This is especially important in an area where you anticipate a problem.



Here's a typical spraying scene. But to an uninformed public, it can set off a controversy that could put you out of a spray contract. Keep the public informed.

If you have real trouble (a spill, bad drift, an injury etc.) and the press descends with a multitude of questions, honesty is the *only* policy. Don't pretend that nothing happened (it's been tried) and don't assume that the reporters are out to get you. Give them the facts, but don't speculate. And if you do not know something, admit it. If questions are asked that deserve answers but the information is not readily available, offer to find the answers and call back. This will help head off the publication of an incomplete (and possibly damaging) story. But be sure you do call back.

Handling the public relations side of a spray program is as important as any other phase of the operation, and in these days of "eco-activism," may be the factor that determines whether the job gets done at all. Help is available and you should use it. Contact the National Agricultural Chemicals Association to help you tell the pesticide story. Companies like The Dow Chemical Company are available to provide help in training your personnel to do a better job. Product information should be readily available from all manufacturers. The tools are at hand; use them.

MOVING?

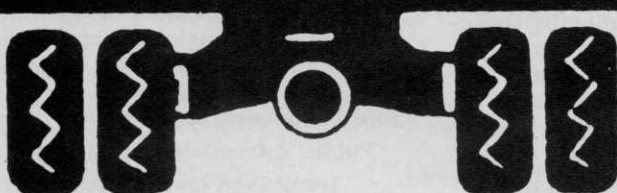
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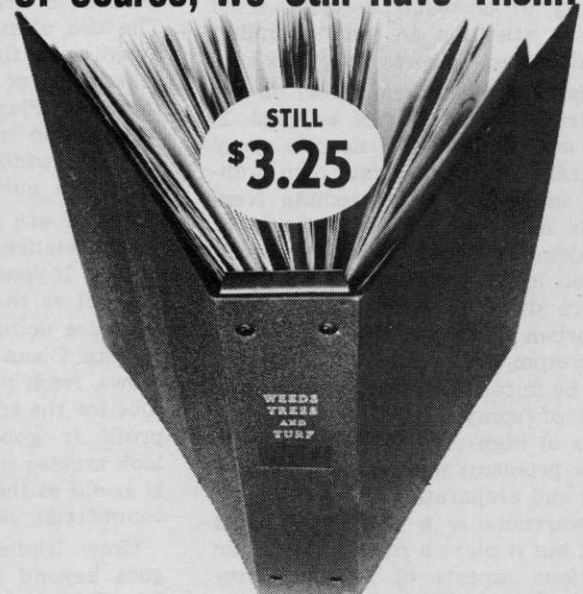
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