

## The non-visionary war on hardwoods

**Joan Baxter, September 2004**

The decision seems to have been taken. The Department of Natural Resources insists it is going ahead with its latest herbicide spray program on Nova Scotia's Crown lands. So once again, those dreaded birches and maples and the nasty little raspberry bushes and the wildlife and birds and bees and earthworms — and the people — in three counties of Nova Scotia are in for an aerial dose of the chemical glyphosate in the herbicide that its makers at Monsanto have named 'Vision'.

In coming weeks - at public expense - 354 hectares will be sprayed in Colchester, Cumberland and Kings Counties. These are areas that have recently been clear cut and the spraying, argues the government, is needed to suppress any 'nuisance' species that might compete with softwoods. Softwoods bring quick and easy profits to the three or four enormous companies that own or lease a good part of Nova Scotia's woodlands — or what's left of them. Flown over Nova Scotia recently? It's alarming what is being done to produce pulp and profit for those giant mills. One source at the Department of Environment admitted to me that at this rate, the forests will be gone in ten years.

Meanwhile, the clear-cutting escalates to epidemic proportions and the Department of Natural Resources continues to spray and to justify its war on hardwoods by trotting out scientific studies (many from the scientific cookbooks of the herbicide's makers) that say Vision is not harmful when used 'correctly'.

So what does 'correctly' mean? According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, when the herbicide is sprayed from helicopters at 60-80 feet above the target area, almost half of it is almost guaranteed to drift, some up to three kilometres from the intended site. So aerial spraying, especially on the small plots targeted in the government's latest program, is a guessing game at best, a nasty biological experiment at worst. Then again, application on the ground isn't all that appealing either, not after a good, long look at some of the independent studies on glyphosate.

Fact is, glyphosate (aka 'Vision') doesn't kill just those nasty hardwoods. While the World Health Organization deems this herbicide 'unlikely to present an acute hazard in normal use', the very few independent studies (those done by scientists not on the manufacturers' payroll) show glyphosate to have all sorts of potentially horrible effects on humans, on wildlife, on fish, on watersheds and on soils. Two oncologists in Sweden (where glyphosate is banned) linked it to rapidly increasing incidence of non-Hodgkins lymphoma, a form of cancer of the lymphatic system. Denmark banned the herbicide in 2003 following shocking evidence that despite manufacturers' claims that bacteria would break it down before it soaked down to contaminate groundwater, that wasn't happening and the country's water supplies were indeed contaminated with glyphosate.

A worldwide coalition of citizens' groups and individuals working to promote sustainable agriculture, the Pesticide Action Network, reports that glyphosate can also lead to diarrhoea, increased blood glucose, red nasal discharge, skin and eye

irritation, pancreatic lesions, salivary gland lesions, growth retardation, and changes in relative weights of organs. Lifetime studies on animals have shown it can cause 'excess growth and death of liver cells, cataracts and eye degeneration'.

As if that weren't enough to convince Nova Scotia's government to ban its application, here's something else our decision-makers might like to contemplate, particularly those who are male. According to studies of the long-term effects of glyphosate on male animals, exposure to the herbicide can lead to 'lowered libido, ejaculate volume and sperm count, as well as an increase in abnormal or dead sperm'.

Yikes. If I were a man, I would sure think twice when deciding whose 'science' I wanted to believe when deciding whether this herbicide is really harmless — the manufacturer and companies that profit from its use (from a very safe distance, of course), or independent researchers who have nothing at all to gain or lose from revealing the truth about potential health risks.

If there are those who still prefer to believe that glyphosate and all the other 'trade secret' ingredients in Vision are harmless, ignoring the damning reports trickling out of independent scientific laboratories — then fine. But let them put their own bodies (and sex drives and sperm counts and livers) to the test by showing up the day the helicopters are dropping this 'harmless' herbicide from the heavens.

Despite what the spin-doctors and hired scientific help at Monsanto may say, 'vision' is not a toxic substance intended to wage war on natural resources. My dictionary tells me it's the 'ability to plan or form policy in a far-sighted way', exactly what I would hope to see in the Department of Natural Resources. Rampant clear-cutting and spraying are short-sighted practises that profit only a handful of people in high places — logging multinationals and chemical makers. Nova Scotians are the losers and they are paying dearly for the outdated and unsustainable forestry policies in this province — with their taxes, with their health and with the destruction of woodlands that the Department of Natural Resources is there, in theory, to manage and nurture with real vision, the non-toxic kind.