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SEPTEMBER 23RD 2024

HOW A CONTROVERSIAL POISON SAVED UTAH LAKE

By Ted Williams

Ninety-five-thousand-acre Utah Lake is a major water source for the Great Salt Lake. If it dries up or sickens, so does the Great Salt Lake. Fifteen years ago, it was dying. But the controversial herbicide glyphosate saved it.

Virtually everything most Americans think they know about glyphosate—the active ingredient in products like Roundup—is wrong. That’s because social media and ads by lawyers offering to sue Bayer (owner of Monsanto, glyphosate’s original manufacturer) are rife with misinformation.

What most Americans don’t know about glyphosate is that it’s often the only option for saving native fish and wildlife from alien plants. When non-native infestations replace habitat, the animals don’t go somewhere else. They die. That’s why boots-on-the-ground environmental groups like The Nature Conservancy depend on glyphosate.

But fear of glyphosate has created big business for lawyers and a fundraising bonanza for some environmental outfits.



In 2015, with no original research, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC)—an appendage of the World Health Organization (WHO)—placed glyphosate on its speculative list of “probable carcinogens” along with “red meat” and “very hot beverages.” It did so even though all scientific authorities that have

done original research, including its parent WHO and the United States EPA, report no link to cancer.

Some studies that review existing research do report possible links to cancer. But the study subjects are farm workers who used large quantities of Roundup for years, frequently without protective gear. Roundup is applied by wildlife managers in relatively tiny amounts.

Still, based on IARC's speculation, there have been glyphosate bans or restrictions in 28 nations as well as municipalities and counties in 15 U.S. states. And Bayer has paid \$11 billion to settle lawsuits brought by cancer victims blaming their illnesses on Roundup.

California responded to the IARC review by requiring that glyphosate products carry cancer warnings. But a federal judge [struck it](#) down, ruling it "inherently misleading ...when apparently all other regulatory and governmental bodies have found the opposite."

According to the international news agency Reuters, IARC "edited findings from a draft of its review of the weedkiller glyphosate that were at odds with its final conclusion."

And this from Dr. Lee Van Wychen, science director for the National and Regional Weed Science Societies: "IARC's review was such a crooked scam. I've never seen anything like it. IARC cherry-picked a couple studies and on top of that fudged the results... Now there are people on the conservation side who are afraid to use glyphosate."

Utah Lake's brackish water and extensive wetlands make it one of North America's most important staging areas for migratory water birds. The watershed also provides vital habitat for other birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish, including the federally threatened June sucker.



Fifteen years ago, this biodiversity appeared doomed by an explosion of phragmites, a non-native, deep-rooted reed that spreads through wind-blown seeds and rhizomes. It grows out to four feet in water and all the way to the transitional zone of dry land.

So thick was Utah Lake's infestation that wildlife couldn't move through it, and people couldn't access the lake. Phragmites created fire hazards, sucked vast amounts of water from the already diminished lake, and generated swarms of mosquitoes by blocking water flow.

Large infestations of phragmites can't be cut or bulldozed, leaving herbicide as the only option. Dead stalks are then crushed or burned to make new growth visible for retreatment.

Spraying with glyphosate formulations began in 2009. "Each year, managers would focus on a different area," reported the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food. Every area of the lake got three consecutive years of the spray and trample treatment.

Today, fish, wildlife, and human access have been largely restored. Glyphosate has eradicated 70 percent of the phragmites and future applications will kill most of what's left.

Revegetation started this spring. With help from local organizations, the Utah Lake Authority has planted 7,500 native seedlings. "Planting parties" of 400 volunteers will plant 10,000 more native plants by year's end.

"For the lake," said Luke Peterson, director of the Utah Lake Authority, "this is a turning point."



Ted Williams is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to

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