

County continues plan to control wild parsnip

As warm weather approaches, Lanark County and local municipal staff and decision makers have been gathering information on best practices for controlling noxious plants, particularly wild parsnip, while gaining understanding of the risks they pose.

County Council has approved continuing a roadside weed spraying program in 2016 for all county roads for two consecutive years, and then to proceed with biannual spraying of 50 per cent of the road system starting in year three. "We plan to work to eradicate wild parsnip by using integrated pest management principles that involve assessment and follow-up," explained Janet Tysick, Lanark County Public Works business manager. "Monitoring and assessing the various areas each year will be important in order to determine the best strategy."

Wild parsnip is becoming increasingly common and has health hazards associated with it. It contains toxic compounds called furanocoumarins, which can cause serious burns or blisters when the sap is exposed to sunlight. The county conducted roadside weed spraying on 80 kilometres of county roads in 2015 on a trial basis with a licenced contractor.

On March 9, the county invited speakers from the Ontario Vegetation Management Association (OVMA), the Ontario Invasive Plant Council (OIPC) and the City of Ottawa to provide information to councillors and staff about the weed, methods to eradicate it and safety precautions. A public session hosted by the Lanark County Stewardship Council is planned for April 30 at the Lanark Civitan Hall.

At the county's session, Iola Price of OIPC described best practices in Ontario to control wild parsnip and outlined its detrimental effects. "It out-competes native vegetation and crowds out important, low-growing plants. Pollinators may not visit as often as other native species. It can reduce the quality of some agricultural forage crop."

She said pest management involves many factors and may require several years of work. "Controlling wild parsnip before it becomes established will reduce its impacts on biodiversity, economy and society." Control measures can include mowing, digging up the plants (for small infestations) or using herbicides (with permits) in the spring before the plants flower.

She emphasized the importance of protective clothing for anyone working near wild parsnip, as well as procedures for washing if exposed to sap. Wild parsnip should not be burned or composted and different municipalities may have disposal rules related to the plant.

Chad Horton, Ontario Vegetation Management Association president, explained the OVMA is a non-profit organization with representatives from every sector of the industry to provide members with a forum for networking and information sharing about environmentally sound, cost effective, industrial and forestry vegetation management practices in Ontario.

He outlined the use of pesticides for public works for the "protection of public health and safety, and to prevent damage to the structural integrity of a public work," adding herbicide application must be approved in Ontario by Health Canada.

Mr. Horton provided an overview of two herbicides that have been highly effective against the weeds (Clearview and Truvist) and outlined the notice requirements from the provincial Ministry of the Environment, including signage or newspaper and online advertisements.

Steve Ford of the OVMA reviewed equipment cleaning protocols for public works staff and best management practices in Ontario to help minimize the spread of wild parsnip. He noted unintentional introduction can happen with heavy equipment encountering contaminated mud, gravel, water, soil and plant material. "Rhizomes and roots can travel unseen in mud lodged in equipment."

He said invasive weeds affect forest regeneration, crop yields, seedling establishment, growth rates and trail management. "Trails act as corridors for invasive plants because use and maintenance create disturbed areas. People, pets and vehicles such as ATVs can all bring invasive plants to trails, which increases labour and costs of trail maintenance and reduces biodiversity."

Allison Wilson, program and project management officer for the City of Ottawa, described their efforts to control the spread of wild parsnip with a mapping exercise, accelerated grass cutting and the application of Clearview in highly infested areas.

"Our results and finding showed mowing is not a successful strategy on its own to decrease infestation," she said, noting this year they will continue with accelerated mowing and herbicide application in the spring. A communication and awareness campaign will include weekly website updates with a list of spray locations, consistent signage in high infestation areas, and a focus on emphasizing the risk to biodiversity.

Teresa Clowe of the Leeds, Grenville, Lanark District Health Unit noted a commissioned report from Public Health Ontario looked at Clearview and indicated there is more danger to being exposed to the toxins in wild parsnip than to the chemical as long as it is applied properly.

The county's spraying program will be advertised and residents may request "no spraying" signs. Some local rural municipalities have opted to join in the county's tender for the program.

The Lanark County Stewardship Council's workshop will feature representatives from the OIPC, OVMA, the City of Ottawa, the county and the health unit on April 30 from 9 a.m. to noon at the Lanark Civitan Hall, 2144 Pine Grove Road. To register or for more information, contact Karen Ballentine at 613-267-4200 ext. 3192 or kballentine@lanarkcounty.ca.

More information about wild parsnip and other invasive plants can be found at www.ontarioinvasiveplants.ca, www.ontario.ca/biodiversity or www.ovma.ca.

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