'Outrageous' chemical herbicide use

"It's ugly, it's unnecessary and it's destabilising the environment."

This is the fiery response from internationally recognised pesticide expert Meriel Watts about the use of glyphosate and picloram herbicides at Whakanewha Regional Park over the past three months.

Dr Watts, who is part of Waiheke Weed Management and Restoration Advisory Panel, is frustrated that Auckland Council's park rangers are still spraying "toxic" herbicides at the park after she raised concerns about it earlier this year.

"It's outrageous that they are still doing it. They have taken no notice of anything we have said," she says.

Grass near the bridge at the main park entrance has been sprayed with glyphosate, a herbicide which has been linked with health problems for humans, including breast cancer, kidney failure and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, as well as destabilising the environment, she says.

Glyphosate has also been sprayed on periwinkle adjacent to Poukaraka wetland, an Auckland Council spokesperson says.

"This is really stupid stuff. That glyphosate is going to end up in the waterways and in the sea and it's contributing to environmental degradation."

"It's frustrating because we managed to get Auckland Transport to stop spraying on roadsides and now the council parks staff are spraying regardless," says Dr Watts, who has a doctorate in pesticide policy and risk assessment.

She believes it is a "waste of money" for the council to be spending scant resources on chemical sprays, when grasses could be mown or simply left to grow.

The council acknowledges that grass has been sprayed, but says herbicides have mostly been used on weeds such as climbing asparagus, Japanese honeysuckle, moth plant, selaginella, woolly nightshade and grey willow.

Park rangers are following the Auckland Regional Pest Management Strategy, which "identifies both animal and plant pests that pose a threat to our natural environment, and how we should manage them," says the council spokesperson.

However, Dr Watts believes the recent spraying breaches Auckland Council's policy to use non-chemical weed management wherever possible and to use herbicides only as a last resort. She plans to arrange a meeting with park rangers to discuss the issue.

Waiheke Local Board chairperson Paul Walden says the board has a spray-free policy that reflects widespread concern in the community about the health and environmental risks from chemical sprays.

"Using glyphosate to control grass in this day and age in a regional park near a wetland is pretty outrageous," he says.

At present, park rangers plan to continue spraying herbicides at Whakanewha over the summer.

 Council keen for spraying on Waiheke

Auckland Council plans to cut $300,000 from Waiheke's parks' budget by using chemical sprays.

Waiheke Local Board chairperson Paul Walden is not impressed that the council intends to use glyphosate in the island's parks from next year to reduce labour costs.

Chemical herbicides would be sprayed on grass beside paths and other areas at playgrounds, beach reserves, walkways and at Whakanewha Regional Park. These areas are currently trimmed with weed eaters and lawn mowers.

Despite the local board including a spray-free policy in its three-year plan, the council has indicated that slashing costs by using chemical sprays will be included in its draft Long Term Plan for 2015 to 2025.

"It's hard to understand why things that are important to the community can't be reflected in the work the council is doing," says Mr Walden.

Waiheke has been opposed to the use of chemical sprays since the 1980s, leading the way for other New Zealand communities, he says.

"It's not something that people have dreamed up that chemical sprays are dangerous for people's health and for the environment. We don't need to use them - there are alternatives," he says.

Recent research has suggested kauri dieback disease may be linked to the use of aliphosphates sprays, he notes.

Mr Walden is also not convinced that using chemicals will achieve the massive savings the council imagines. He says that employing local contractors or working with community groups could offer greater savings and better results.

While Auckland Transport is currently using an organic herbicide on roadsides, Mr Walden says that if chemical spraying starts in council parks, the road edges could soon be dosed in chemicals too.

The local board aims to provide information for the community about the impact on Waiheke of the cost cutting in the council's draft long term plan, so that people can "push back" against the changes.

The public will be able to give feedback on the Draft Long Term Plan from January next year.

Rose Davis