

# California tribes warn of logging herbicide dangers

by Tricia King  
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"People are dying," says Susan Burdick emphatically. "We believe it's because of the spraying."

Burdick spoke to a gathering of indigenous peoples from throughout the western hemisphere gathered recently near Palmer for meetings of the Indigenous Environmental Network and International Indian Treaty Council.

Tears well up in the Yurok basket weaver's eyes as she tell of the health problems now common among her people, whose traditional culture is based on gathering native plants and wild foods in the forests and along the rivers of their northern California homeland.

"In just about every household going down the river, someone has either had cancer or has died of respiratory problems," Burdick said. "We've lost a lot of people."

The spraying of plant-killing chemicals has become a common

practice in Yurok country as a direct consequence of clearcut logging in the area, according to Burdick. In the wake of a clearcut, broadleaf plants will take over, preventing the smaller "money tree" saplings from growing to a marketable size quickly as the timber companies would like. In an attempt to encourage tree re-growth, the U.S. Forest Service and timber companies spray chemicals over logging areas from helicopters every spring, Burdick said, adding that some of the chemicals are notorious as being components of the Agent Orange defoliant used during the Vietnam war.

"By killing the broadleaf plants, they are also spreading poisons on our basket plants, on our medicine plants and on our acorn trees, which are something we depend on," she said.

"Basketry is not a craft; it's a way of life," Burdick asserts. "In my tribe, when you're born, you're placed in a baby basket. All of our

gathering and cooking is done in baskets."

In addition, baskets are a central part of the tribe's most sacred dances and ceremonies. The traditional ways of gathering and weaving baskets involves putting all the basket materials into the mouth, making the possible presence of toxic chemicals an even greater concern. And the poisons may also be transmitted through wild game, such as deer, who eat affected plants, or through contaminated drinking water.

Since the formation of the California Indian Basketweavers Association five years ago, the Yuroks and others have met with state and federal officials to voice their concerns about the herbicides. They've been promised future meetings and tests to determine if there's a link between the herbicides and local health concerns. One EPA official suggested labeling chemicals to direct users away from Native American gathering areas. Burdick is skeptical.

"Where is it that we don't gather? We're everywhere!" she said. "There's no time for meetings. It's time to do something drastic. They need to take all this stuff off the market until it's completely tested."

Burdick has been hit by logging trucks and arrested for protesting the spraying. The threat of herbicide poisoning has given her the means to overcome her natural shyness, and to travel long distances seeking support.

She encouraged anyone interested in the issue of clearcuts and herbicides to contact the California Indian Weavers Association, 16894 China Flats Rd., Nevada City, CA 95959.



Susan Burdick (Yurok) of the California Basketweavers Associations, tells a workshop of the health problems suffered by her peoples, because of herbicides (weed-killers like Agent Orange) used in conjunction with clearcut logging in her area.

Photo by Tricia King