

# State studies herbicide use at city schools

■ Tree damage at 2nd Austin school brings wider investigation

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A potent herbicide the Austin school district used to kill unwanted weeds and grass is responsible for another outbreak of barren and dying trees at an elementary school campus and has prompted state investigators to visit every school where the chemical was used.

The Texas Structural Pest Control Board launched its second inquiry into the way the district used Hyvar X, an herbicide with the active ingredient bromacil, after learning of sickly trees at Highland Park Elementary School near Northwest Austin.

Just nine months ago, the board investigated a similar occurrence at Barton Hills Elementary School. Leaves on 25 live oaks at the South Austin campus were curling and turning brown, symptoms of herbicide poisoning. The agency that regulates urban pest control concluded that the district had not followed directions for use of Hyvar X, because it was applied along jogging tracks lined with trees.

"The violation found was use of a herbicide inconsistent with label

List of affected schools.

B2

directions," said Bennie Mathis, the board's executive director. "It says not to use near trees. They should have been more cautious in applying it."

District officials thought the situation was an isolated incident until they were notified this spring that red oaks, live oaks, cedar elms and hackberry trees at the Highland Park campus had similar symptoms. Of 36 affected trees, three are dead.

"We don't know why the symptoms didn't show up immediately at Highland Park. That's still a puzzle to us," said John Gargus, assistant director for maintenance.

While he can't say for sure that trees at the other 22 campuses where the herbicide was applied will be damaged, Mathis said soil conditions and weather are the major factors related to the delay of symptoms.

"Since we had a very wet spring, that would have delayed the damage to the trees," Mathis said. "There's always the possibility others would be affected, but since all these months have gone by, the damage would likely have shown up by now."

The district applied 46 gallons

See Schools', B2



Ralph Barner/AA-S

Bob Sprague, a Texas Structural Pest Control Board investigator, studies trees at Highland Park Elementary School on Thursday. The herbicide Hyvar X was used at 24 Austin schools in 1996.

shirts caused by leaking water or such losses after the sun circuit der that the claims be paid.

# Schools' herbicide use studied

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of the herbicide in August 1996 along jogging tracks at 24 campuses. Most of the tracks were lined with trees, Gargus said.

"It has not been used since," Gargus said. "We only used it that one time."

The penalty for the violation was a three-month license suspension for the employee who used the herbicide. That person also had to attend continuing education in the use of herbicides.

Paul Wrottenbery, who drives by Highland Park daily, alerted the state agency to the ill trees there. He said oak wilt in his own neighborhood has made him more aware of sick-looking trees.

"We're kind of sensitive to losing trees," Wrottenbery said. "I started making some calls just as a

## Affected campuses

The Austin school district used Hyvar X at these campuses during summer 1996:

- |                                |                                 |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Austin High School             | Graham Elementary School        |
| Bowie High School              | Highland Park Elementary School |
| Reagan High School             | Kocurek Elementary School       |
| Kealing Junior High            | Maplewood Elementary School     |
| Bedichek Middle School         | Menchaca Elementary School      |
| Burnet Middle School           | Odom Elementary School          |
| Pearce Middle School           | Pleasant Hill Elementary School |
| Barton Hills Elementary School | Reilly Elementary School        |
| Blackshear Elementary School   | St. Elmo Elementary School      |
| Boone Elementary School        | Sims Elementary School          |
| Davis Elementary School        | Summitt Elementary School       |
|                                | Walnut Creek Elementary School  |
|                                | Zilker Elementary School        |

concerned citizen. It concerns me from the standpoint of anything with the potential to kill trees clearly needs to be more carefully handled."

Since the Barton Hills incident, the district has used manual tools, hand labor and other methods to get rid of unwanted vegetation. At Barton Hills and Highland Park,

the district implemented a revitalization program to help the trees recover. Any that die will be replaced with similar mature trees, said Lance Giles, the supervisor of buildings and grounds.

Literature about Hyvar X claims low toxicity to mammals, birds and insects and no long-term illnesses or significant health effects associated with its use.