

Smith River Lily Bulb Controversy

November 9, 2024



Is the water safe to drink in the Smith River? Are copper minerals in the water shed contaminating the rich soil which help grow lily bulbs, a significant economic driver for Del Norte? The subject continues to vex Smith River residents. On this occasion, several community members addressed the supervisors at a recent presentation of the Northcoast Regional Water Quality Control Board and its two year environmental draft presentation.

At the conclusion of the presentation, many members in the audience had plenty to say. A plethora of medical complaints included a shopping list of ailments: head aches, skin disorders, inability to breath and even bone cancer were attributed to the spraying of pesticides used to harvest lily bulbs. Are lily bulb chemicals and alleged high levels of copper causing health problems?

The allegations were palpable. The evidence was negligible.

Is this much ado about nothing?

Jeff Beard, Director of the Smith River Water District underscored the water in Smith River is clean, fresh and absolutely safe to drink.

He continued, "Smith River's water source is upstream from Rowdy Creek, far from the lily bulb fields." He continued, "recent testing showed only three parts ug/l. The maximum level of copper toxicity, according to the State is 1300 ug/L. Smith River water is 430x safer than the State level." Beard suggested property owners should check older, aging water pipes within their homes for mineral toxicity.

Every few years, the subject of water safety in the Smith River's drinking water emerges. The last time these harrowing questions were brought to the Board was 2015 when the Siskiyou Land Conservancy addressed its profound concern regarding the harm reportedly caused by the lily bulb industry. Past surveys have shown no contamination of Smith River watershed; yet the scrutiny continues.

The recent spate of health complaints is not new news to Smith River. John Roberts, a four-decades resident of Smith River expressed his doubt on the economic impact of the Smith River lily bulb industry. "The farms employ minimum wage laborers," he shared. Roberts expressed concern the alleged high rate of cancer deaths in Smith River. "No one talks about the "C" word in Smith River." No lethality data of cancer deaths were brought to supervisors' attention by public speaker Roberts.

Lily bulb grower Becky Crockett (Crockett Farms) detailed a brief history of growing lily bulbs. Crockett shared the bulb history started in Curry County. At its zenith, she stated there were as many as 600 growers between southern Oregon and northern California back in the 1940s. A steady decline over the decades has diminished the lily bulb footprint to some 2000 acres and today there are but three remaining lily growers producing on some 200 acres of land, and no where near the Smith River watershed.

Who or what should one believe?

There is no question, there are some, even labeling themselves experts, who believe the economic driver of lily bulbs poses a clear and present danger and should be driven out of Del Norte; truth be told, there is no evidence to support that position.

The Board directed Agricultural Commissioner Justin Riggs to research the subject and report to the supervisors, expediently.

The Board meets the 2nd and 4th Tuesday's at 10AM at the Flynn Center.