


OUTDOORS

# OC Residents Wrestle With Failed Promises To Restrict Chemical Herbicides



BY NOAH BIESIADA

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Carolyn McCuan in Los Rios Park in San Juan Capistrano on Tuesday, March 24, 2026. Credit: JULIE LEPOPO, Voice of OC

When Carolyn McCuan moved to San Juan Capistrano in the fall of 2024, she did it on a promise from the city’s then public works director – no chemical herbicides in town.

At her previous home in Aliso Viejo, McCuan said she faced years of health problems from heavy spraying of glyphosate-based herbicides like RoundUp near her home, a special subset of pesticides designed to kill plants.

“The biggest thing for us was we moved here because we thought it was safe and found out they used RoundUp all over the place,” McCuan said. “It makes me really upset.”

Heavy exposure to glyphosates can cause nausea and vomiting according to the [Centers for Disease Control](#), which also notes it’s been “associated with respiratory effects (lung and nose), such as irritation in the nose, or asthma, in people using glyphosate products.”

It’s largely unclear what the long term health impacts are from repeated exposure to glyphosate, but they aren’t good according to UC Irvine Professor of [Developmental and Cell Biology](#) Bruce Blumberg, who’s advocated for the chemicals not to be used in various Orange County cities.

Over the past few months, more residents have been questioning the local use of chemical herbicides in their communities as a state probe was recently initiated in South Orange County.

**[[Read: Santana: Herbicide Use Near Doheny Beach Triggers State Probe](#)]**

In a Friday interview, Blumberg noted there have been multiple settlements to workers who helped spray the chemical that later developed lymphoma, and that cities should err on the side of caution to not use the chemical wherever possible.

“We don’t really know the full spectrum of negative consequences, it takes a lot of money and effort to study that. There’s no one providing that money,” Blumberg said. “The long term consequences are by and large not completely known, but they’re certainly not beneficial.”

McCuan said it took a heavy toll on her health.

“I used to run marathons,” McCuan said. “I don’t feel like how I did five years ago when I was able to walk out the door and go run 5-7 miles. My energy has never gone back to what it was, but it’s much better than when I was bedridden.”



Carolyn McCuan says spraying of glyphosate-based herbicides has harmed her health. Credit: JULIE LEOPO, Voice of OC

After years of fighting her HOA board over the use of the chemicals, she decided to move to San Juan Capistrano based on their pledge that none of those chemicals were being used to manage the local landscape.

But just two months later, she found records from the city showcasing they were using those same herbicides all over town.

When she started asking questions, she said the same city staff who encouraged her to move to the city stopped talking to her.

It's a story many residents across Orange County are living as they find out that promises from city and county leaders to back off using glyphosates and other toxic herbicides never came true.

## **Cities Often Reverse Promises to End Herbicide Use**

When McCuan moved to San Juan Capistrano, city leaders were part of a group of cities that had promised to prioritize not using herbicides with glyphosate.

But that wasn't a promise the city stuck to, a fact officials only seemed to realize after residents began complaining.

San Juan Capistrano's city manager declined to comment on this article beyond releasing a statement they sent several activists including McCuan, who complained about the use of herbicides, admitting their policies restricting them had "not been applied consistently."

It remains unclear exactly when and how many of these pesticides were used, with city staff noting in their statement that the tracking was "inconsistent."



Carolyn McCuan touches landscaping lining a walkway at Los Rios Park in San Juan Capistrano on Tuesday, March 24, 2026.  
Credit: JULIE LEOPO, Voice of OC

“The program has not been applied consistently at City-maintained areas, with the exception of City trails,” wrote San Juan Capistrano City Manager Benjamin Siegel.

“For other City-maintained areas, available records were insufficient to determine the specific nature and extent of pest management practices each time pesticides were used, or whether the landscape maintenance contractor consistently followed the prioritized approach,” Siegel said.

To read the full letter, [click here](#).

Moving forward, the city promised concerned residents to focus on “improved communication and coordination” with any gardening contractors to ensure they’re following the proper procedures.

## Irvine's Promise Came With An Ordinance

Irvine was one of the first cities in the county to publicly swear off the use of herbicides, signing an ordinance into law that made the chemicals a last resort in 2016.

“I live in Quail Hill, I’m very pleased they’ve moved into the organic sprays and pesticide,” said then Councilwoman Christina Shea at the council’s Feb. 23 2016 meeting. “We’re moving forward in the right direction.”

But in 2024, council members quietly rolled back that law to allow for its use in specific instances by the Irvine Ranch Conservancy, a nonprofit that manages the wildlife over much of the city’s open space.

While glyphosate remains banned for use in the city’s parks and common areas, it’s now used near the city’s trails and open space.

Scott Graves, a spokesperson for the conservancy, said the chemicals are useful in helping fight back invasive species and that the years where the city banned their use limited their efforts.

“When those chemicals were prohibited, it was definitely more of a challenge. Quail Hills became more degraded with artichoke thistle,” Graves said in a March interview. “It’s a struggle, we’re still trying to remove them.”



Artichoke thistle, an invasive species in California, is especially susceptible to catching fire. Fire Watch volunteers look out for this kind of highly-flammable vegetation when deployed. Credit: ANGELINA HICKS, Voice of OC

Graves said they've used herbicide spraying to help fight back against invasive plants near Quail Hill, and that they're continuing to follow the city's policies limiting its use.

"We look at it as a tool of last resort," Graves said. "If you don't remove these invasive plants, they will set seed, their seed will go in, and it will take several years of grow kill cycles to deplete the invasive plants seeds."

But many of the activists who fought for the ban to be implemented say the city went about it the wrong way by trying to quietly roll it back.

Kim Konte, one of the activists who fought for the restrictions in the first place and later moved out of Irvine, said the use of pesticides in cities that pledged to restrict their use damages trust with the public, saying it created a "false sense of security."

"What is the point of a policy if it's never followed?" Konte said in an April interview. "Who's overseeing implementation?"

She also pointed to studies showing that overuse of pesticides can lead to “[super weeds](#)” that resist the chemicals.

“It’s a direct threat to public health,” Konte said. “Period.”

Blumberg, the UCI professor, who helped campaign with Konte to many of the cities that adopted restrictions, said it was “disappointing” to see so many places ignoring their own rules.

“They’re doing just what they used to do,” Blumberg said. “There really is no recourse other than the public voting those people out of office the next time they have a chance.”

## County Leaders Face Questions on Continued Herbicide Spraying

County leaders are now facing questions over their own use of herbicides from a group of activists called Creek Team.

In March, Supervisor Katrina Foley pledged to halt the spraying of any pesticides in the San Juan and Trabuco Creek flood channels for at least a year that lay within her district.



A bird rests on a rock in Trabuco Creek on Friday, March 6, 2026, in San Juan Capistrano, Calif. Credit: BELLA ORTIZ, Voice of OC

[**Read: [Santana: Herbicide Spraying of South OC Waterways Halted, For Now](#)**]

But **activists confronted county contractors** spraying herbicides in the San Diego Creek in Irvine last week, with the **crews leaving after they were questioned** by the activists on what they were spraying.

OC Public Works staff confirmed a confrontation took place, but said it fell outside the area where Foley's program takes place, so spraying will continue.

Foley's spokesperson did not respond to requests for comment on this article.

When questioned about continued use of herbicides on Facebook and specifically pointing to San Diego Creek, Foley said the decision isn't wholly up to her.

"That area is not in my district and not the area where staff agreed to halt. Nothing changed from my position and efforts since we got ocpw to halt spraying in Trabuco & San Juan channels," Foley wrote. "I support elimination of toxic chemicals from our community wherever possible. It's not a lone decision by me. I'll need board support and plan to bring forward recommendations later this year."

Brent Linas, one of the leaders of Creek Team who was at the San Diego Creek, said the cities in many instances have done a better job at dealing with the issue than the county has when they've reached out.

Linas specifically praised Costa Mesa, who has a policy limiting the use of chemical herbicides, and noted that when volunteers reached out with concerns the policy was violated city leaders quickly addressed the issue.

"I think it's a really interesting lesson in civics in that the cities are like, 'We screwed up, this is a violation of what we want to do and hey we're going to work with you to figure this out,'" Linas said. "Creek Team couldn't ask for more than that. We're not here to skewer people, we're just here to help."

"The county is like 'Stay out of my business, you don't know what you're talking about and you're threatening people's safety,'" he continued. "'We're going to do what we want cause you are irrelevant to us.' That really is the message Supervisor Foley sends and OC Public Works sends."

*Noah Biesiada is a Voice of OC reporter. Contact him at [nbiesiada@voiceofoc.org](mailto:nbiesiada@voiceofoc.org).*

