

Herbicide over-spray complicates routine project

The most fundamental component of a water system and that most necessary to satisfy subsequent development and growth is the installation of water lines. Water pipelines are the means of conveyance, a way for the product to get to the consumer. The installation of water lines is common in rural areas, cities, trailer parks, etc. It's that routine work that hardly has much fanfare or any problems. It is often expensive, yet essential. An easy job can progress thousands of feet-per-day while a tough one is measured in tens of feet-per-day.

So, you have your easements, you've purchased your pipeline materials, you've hired a contractor. Work begins. Before you know it, a smooth operation borders on a fiasco of immense proportions – all because of the actions of people over whom you have no control. That's the scenario that recently took place in Labette County. Labette County RWD 3 was in the process of upgrading a water supply line from the Public Wholesale Water District 4 plant.

Unexpected situations are less than welcome to any job site. This is particularly true when those situations result in a problem that you are unsure about what to do with. As crews from a contracted company for the rural water district opened a ditch line across

a field and had pipe lying there ready to push together, a chemical spray truck arrived. The truck proceeded to begin spraying the field with what at that time was an

It became immediately apparent that there were numerous issues to resolve, the first of which was to determine what chemical had been sprayed. After a

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unknown substance. During the course of the application the truck managed to spray not only the trench that was cut for the new RWD water line but the driver also succeeded in over-spraying numerous sections of exposed pipe that were laid out.

discussion with driver, it was learned that the spray was Roundup herbicide, a contaminant regulated under the Safe Drinking Water Act.

Next, how to take corrective action. The questions were obvious. Who had ever had the



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A crew with Lafarge Construction of Parsons, Kan. installs a water line south of Cherokee RWD 9 in southeast Kansas. Line installation is common across Kansas. Occasionally things go awry such as they did recently in Labette County.

misfortune of having new pipeline sprayed down with herbicide while trenching and preparing to install the pipeline? Would the pipe be safe to carry water if used? What were the steps that needed to be taken to ensure that the chemical was gone?

Ken McNickel, operator for Labette RWD 3, properly decided to contact the district office of the Kansas Department of Health and



A self propelled crop sprayer, pictured above, has the clearance with the high wheels and the speed to spray a lot of crop acreage in a day – or a lot of pipe.

Environment at Chanute to ask for guidance in this situation. When dealing with a situation that has the potential to cause serious problems such as this one did, it is highly recommended that KDHE be contacted. Even if it is a situation that is under control, if there is the potential for problems it is best to keep KDHE apprised of the situation.

After contacting KDHE, their district staff came to the site to assess the situation and offer advice. Also traveling to the site was a representative of the Kansas Department of Agriculture.

Studies conducted concerning Roundup and other herbicides using glyphosate as the active ingredient have ended with differing opinions on the ability of the chemical to contaminate drinking water supplies. One study shows that when the chemical comes into contact with the ground it

essentially binds with the soil and is inactive until it is degraded. The binding action of the soil prevents the contaminant from traveling in or through the soil to harm other plants or reach ground water supplies. Studies in Denmark have shown that the chemical is polluting water supplies there at a much higher rate than previously thought. Either way, what's a rural water district in Kansas or anywhere else supposed to do when open pipe on top of the ground is exposed to a commercial herbicide?

In the interest of public health, the entire exposed pipe that was present was condemned for use as potable water pipe. The ditch itself was sprayed with a highly concentrated chlorine solution in an effort to negate the affects of the chemicals present. The safety of the customer's drinking water was the foremost concern and the driving force of the decision-making process that day.

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All told, this situation worked out okay. The pipeline will be finished and the water will be safe to drink. For everyone involved his or her actions were based on the best available information at the time. A lesson to take from this is that everyone was working together towards a common goal.

What would you do if faced with a similar situation or you find yourself facing a different problem and you don't know the right way to overcome it? I would encourage you to get on the phone and not to be afraid to ask for help. There are folks out there who are only a phone call away. Your Rural Water Association – KRWA, KDHE, neighboring systems and even suppliers are all willing to offer help. Don't be isolated with the problem; call and help will come.



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