

'The color of wealth'

Financial security in Chicago's Black and brown communities was eroded intentionally by predatory and discriminatory policies, a study finds. **Life+Travel**

Urban rebound

As workers return to the office, residents are moving back to Chicago and other cities, driving up home prices. **Real Estate**



Devin Hester and his mom, Juanita Brown, unveil his Hall of Fame bust. **JOHN J. KIM/TRIBUNE**

CHICAGO SPORTS
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Bears greets Devin Hester and Steve McMichael join the Pro Football Hall of Fame in a Chicago-tinged induction ceremony on Saturday.

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Chicago Tribune



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SUNDAY, AUGUST 4, 2024

BREAKING NEWS AT CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

Misclassifications, missed millions

Luxury home? Vacant lot? Cook County assessor regularly undervalues properties

By Alex Nitkin, A.D. Quig and Cam Rodriguez

This story is a collaboration between the Illinois Answers Project and the Chicago Tribune.

Denise Gilmore feels like she's being taxed out of Humboldt Park. She and her husband, Willie, have lived on Pierce Avenue since 2010, but in 14 years their prop-

erty tax bill has ballooned more than 60% to \$3,319 even though they haven't renovated their brick workers cottage. Taxes could hit even harder next year after Cook

County Assessor Fritz Kaegi's office increased the home's valuation by \$60,000 to \$250,000. But some of the Gilmores' neighbors — whose homes are significantly newer and worth much more — haven't felt the same pain. That's in large part because Kaegi's office regularly misclassifies and undervalues properties throughout Cook County, an Illinois Answers Project and Chicago Tribune investigation found. Across the street from the Gilmores, an \$843,000 two-story farm-

house built in 2021 continues to be categorized by Kaegi's office as vacant land worth only \$44,280. The new homeowners' 2024 tax bill is only \$750. Halfway down the block, the owners of a sleek, gray \$695,000 two-story home purchased more than a year ago were charged just \$1,315 in taxes this year because the assessor's office continues to classify the property not as a house but as a residential garage at the back of a vacant lot valued at just \$73,900.

The assessor's office did much the same for a two-story home that recently sold for \$800,000 a few blocks away on Lawndale Avenue. For years, the office has assessed the home as vacant land worth only \$35,710. The homeowners' most recent tax bill? Just \$756. And about a half-mile east on Crystal Street, another farmhouse-style residence that sold for \$875,000 in early 2022 is still classified by Kaegi's office as vacant

Turn to Assessments, Page 6



'Chemical trespassing'

By Michael Hawthorne
Chicago Tribune

Patsy Hirsch and her husband moved to an Elgin subdivision nearly three decades ago, drawn by a backyard thicket of oak, hickory and cherry trees so dense the canopy blotted out the sun. During her free time, Hirsch replaced much of their lawn with native plants and grew vegetables in a sunny spot on the side of the house. She studied to become a master gardener, cultivating a network of fellow enthusiasts devoted to sustainable growing methods. At first glance it appears Hirsch's property is an idyllic refuge on the edge of suburbia. But her training didn't

Illinois trees and plants suffering widespread damage from renewed use of decades-old weedkillers on farms, studies show

Above: Students play at the Bluestem Hall Nature School in Urbana, which is often hit by herbicides drifting from nearby farmland, on April 22. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

prepare her for an onslaught of weed-killers drifting from nearby farms and neighboring yards — a scourge spreading throughout Illinois as chemical companies revive volatile herbicides from generations past. Trees are slowly dying after being hit for years by weedkillers. Their once-robust canopy has thinned. Many of the leaves are cupped or deformed. So are the Hirsch family's flowers and vegetables. "Once you learn how to identify herbicide damage, you can't unsee it," the retired nurse said during a recent tour. "Nobody is doing anything to stop it from happening, though."

Turn to Damage, Page 4

PARIS OLYMPICS

Chicago's Little helps relay team take silver

Athletes with Illinois ties earn medals on the water, on the court

By Stacy St. Clair
Chicago Tribune

PARIS — There are several reasons why Shamier Little could be disappointed with her silver medal in the Olympic mixed relay. The Chicago native had built a comfortable lead for the U.S. team with her blazing second leg Saturday evening on a rain-soaked track in the Stade de France. She and her teammates also had been the heavy favorites to win gold, having set the world record the previous evening. And everything seemed to be going the Americans' way, until the team from the Netherlands passed them just a few feet from the finish line. Shamier Little, however, knows what disappointment is. And this — a silver medal and a world record in her Olympic debut — is not it. Little, 29, fell short of making the

Turn to Olympics, Page 11



Shamier Little celebrates her silver medal in the mixed 4x400-meter relay on Saturday. **BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

INSIDE: Minutes after Simone Biles won her seventh Olympic gold of her career on Saturday in a vault final, she played coy when asked if the event marked the final time she would compete. Plus, the U.S. men's basketball team wrapped up the No. 1 seed going into the medal round. **Chicago Sports**

'This was never a pitch to Black people'

Donald Trump sought to pit Black Americans against migrants in Chicago. It's part of an ongoing GOP tactic. **Chicagoland, Page 3**

Blue Angels in the blue skies

The Chicago Air and Water Show is Aug. 10-11. Check out our annual guide for more on where to watch and all about the performers. **A+E**

TODAY'S WEATHER



High 91 Low 73

Complete Chicagoland forecast on Page 18

\$5.75 city and suburbs and elsewhere
177th year No. 217 © Chicago Tribune

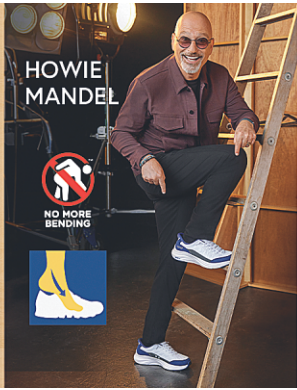


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Marty Kemper, a retired biologist with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, has been working with the Prairie Rivers Network to document damage in southern Illinois. Kemper is standing Tuesday in front of a white oak tree that he says has been damaged by herbicides. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS**

Damage

from Page 1

Scientists and volunteers are finding trees, flowers and other plants afflicted by herbicide drift everywhere they look in Illinois, including in nature preserves, state parks, orchards, school yards and town squares.

At least one weedkiller was detected in more than 90% of the plant tissue samples collected from a variety of settings during the past six years by the nonprofit Prairie Rivers Network, according to an upcoming report.

A separate study by the Illinois Natural History Survey found a similar pattern on state-owned land set aside for recreation, wildlife habitat and prairie restoration.

Scores of mature trees have been killed or injured by drifting weedkillers, the researchers reported.

Oak trees, some of which have been alive since before the Civil War, suffered the most extensive damage. One is the state champion post oak, which has a canopy more than 100 feet wide near Nashville in southern Illinois and boasts a trunk more than 18 feet in diameter.

“It’s got to be at least 200 years old,” said Marty Kemper, a retired state biologist who lives nearby. “It obviously has to have some great genes to have stuck around this long. But like other post oaks it’s not going to escape the same fate if this chronic, pervasive injury continues.”

Complaints about herbicide drift skyrocketed during the past decade after the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency approved more extensive use of 2,4-D and dicamba—chemicals from the 1940s and 1960s brought back to help farmers kill weeds that evolved to survive being doused with other herbicides.

Both weedkillers are prone to drifting away from fields during application and up to weeks later. Plants miles away can be harmed.

“This is chemical trespassing,” said Kim Erndt-Pitcher, director of ecological health at the Prairie Rivers Network and, with Kemper, co-author of the group’s new report. “It’s a violation of other people’s property.”

The weedkillers also are potentially endangering human health.

In March, researchers reported they found traces of 2,4-D, one of the ingredients in compounds used to defoliate forests during the Vietnam War, in the urine of every one of the 150 pregnant women studied in Indiana. Seven out of 10 showed signs of dicamba exposure.

A 2020 study by the National Institutes of Health concluded pesticide applicators who sprayed dicamba are more likely to develop



A field in Urbana is sprayed May 23.

certain cancers than those who don’t. Other research has documented how 2,4-D is among a number of pesticides that interfere with hormones regulating growth, fertility and reproduction.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer, an arm of the United Nations, considers 2,4-D a possible human carcinogen.

Chemical companies — and the EPA — say dicamba and 2,4-D aren’t harmful to people at the concentrations farmers are advised to spray.

“We are confident that XtendiMax herbicide, when used according to the label, can be used safely and successfully on-target,” a spokesman for Bayer, one of the leading manufacturers of dicamba, said in an email referring to one of its trademarks for the weedkiller.

BASF, another top dicamba producer, said it remains “committed to working with the EPA and other stakeholders to identify workable, durable weed-control solutions for dicamba-tolerant crops.”

A trade group for 2,4-D makers echoed those comments.

“There is a large body of peer-reviewed research to support the fact that when used according to label directions,” the weedkiller “is safe for humans, animals and the environment,” said Lindsay Thompson, a spokeswoman for the 2,4-D Task Force.

How America got to this point requires a look back to at least the mid-1990s when the EPA allowed St. Louis-based Monsanto, now owned by Bayer, to introduce genetically modified corn and soybean seeds resistant to its best-selling weedkiller, glyphosate, commonly known as Roundup.

At the time Monsanto advertised that Roundup

was as safe as table salt. If farmers could spray the chemical on crops altered to resist it, the company proclaimed, they could dramatically reduce the use of herbicides while improving yields.

Multiple juries have since awarded billions of dollars to people who blamed their cancers on glyphosate. As part of a long-running study, government researchers reported last year that farmers and others exposed to the weedkiller had markers in their urine associated with the development of cancer and other diseases.

Meanwhile, overuse of Roundup spawned weeds capable of ignoring the chemical and growing as big as baseball bats.

Monsanto/Bayer, BASF, Dow Chemical and other manufacturers responded with new genetically modified crops that can resist dicamba and 2,4-D as well as Roundup.

Dow, which later spun off its crop sciences subsidiary into a company called Corteva, applied for patents for corn and soybeans it claimed could survive weedkillers from up to 17 different chemical families, a 2015 Chicago Tribune investigation found.

The unintended results are showing up throughout Illinois, a major producer of corn and soybeans.

Time and time again, crops grown primarily for biofuels, processed foods and animal feed are sprayed with weedkillers that infringe upon the livelihoods of other farmers with little, if any, clout in Washington, D.C., and state capitals.

Four years ago Annie and Dennis Holtz bought 10 acres of land outside Herscher in Kankakee County. They made plans to grow native flowers, fruits, vegetables and medici-



Herbicide damage can be seen on a Christmas fern at a garden in Elgin on July 9.

nal herbs, a big change from their previous experiences planting community gardens and working for small organic farmers. The state later gave them a license to grow hemp.

One of the main ideas in their business plan was to offer weekly flower subscriptions at farmers markets that could provide cash upfront to support other parts of their fledgling operation.

But their land is surrounded by corn and soybean fields. Weedkillers applied to those croplands drifted and decimated the Holtz’s flowers two years in a row.

“We go out there and bust our asses for two months and all it takes is one farmer in an air-conditioned tractor spraying for a half hour to wipe out everything we’ve planted,” Dennis said during a recent interview.

Like Hirsch, the Elgin homeowner, Holtz and his wife filed complaints with the Illinois Department of Agriculture. Hirsch at least got confirmation her trees, flowers and vegetables are contaminated with herbicides. The Holtzes said they still haven’t received a response.

Pesticide applicators can be fined only if state inspectors find they have violated

spraying guidelines.

Abbie Frank shared a similar story.

She runs an early childhood center near downstate Urbana in a renovated machine shed handed down by her grandfather. Near the end of his life, he restored the family’s 120-acre farm to native prairie and donated it to the state for a nature preserve. Frank’s Bluestem Hall Nature School attracts young parents interested in instilling in their children an appreciation for the plants, animals and insects around them.

Without warning, Frank said, the telltale smell of weedkillers wafts onto school grounds, forcing teachers to corral children back inside. School staff repeatedly witness chemical spraying on days when the EPA’s temperature and wind guidelines advise it shouldn’t occur, she said.

“We are trying to cultivate joy and respect for the natural world in a way that will last these children a lifetime,” Frank said. “Yet we are in the graveyard of ecology all around us.”

In an email response to questions, the department noted a recently amended state law prohibits the spraying of certain pesticides within 500 feet of schools.

Dicamba and 2,4-D aren’t on the list.

Future reliance on dicamba is up for grabs. A federal court in February rejected the EPA’s nod to expand usage of the weedkiller, the latest in a series of court decisions condemning the agency’s reviews of dicamba.

Soon after President Joe Biden took office in 2021, the newly appointed head of the EPA’s chemical safety office apologized to career staff for the Trump administration’s decision three years earlier to extend the agency’s dicamba registrations, which the agency’s inspector general found had discounted critical studies of health risks.

Yet the Biden EPA allowed farmers to use dicamba stocks already on the market this year. In a statement, the agency said budget cuts prevent it from meeting congressionally mandated deadlines to determine if dicamba-based weedkillers can be sold in future years.

The statement did not respond to questions about how the EPA will address scathing dicamba-related rulings by federal judges but said the agency considers herbicide drift when reviewing applications from chemical companies.

Agricultural groups are clamoring for direction before farmers order seeds for the next growing season. More than 50 million acres of dicamba-resistant soybeans and cotton have been planted in recent years.

“We need to find new, effective tools,” said Kyle Kunkler, director of government affairs at the American Soybean Association. “At the same time we need to make sure we are sustainably stewarding the tools we already have so they can be useful for years to come.”

Environmental activists contend the answer is returning to the mostly chemical-free agricultural practices of the past, including rotating the types of plants grown from year to year in a particular field and planting cover crops to choke out weeds after harvest. Selective interventions with tillage also work.

These methods already are used by organic farmers and some conventional ones as well.

“The way Big Ag operates today just isn’t sustainable,” said Bill Freese, science policy analyst at the Center for Food Safety, a nonprofit group that has repeatedly petitioned and sued to reverse EPA decisions.

“Making these herbicide-resistant crops has been a cash cow for chemical companies without any regard for the long-term welfare of farmers, creating deep divisions in rural America,” Freese said. “As a weed scientist once told me, what’s happening now is unlike anything we’ve seen in the modern era of agriculture.”