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Politicians ponder smoke-black summer skies

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The summer days when grass seed farmers clean their fields with fire and fill the southern Willamette Valley with columns of smoke are still five months away.

Still, the controversial practice is kindling discussion and initiatives this week in the halls of local and state government.

Health advocates want farmers to give up field burning; farmers say they need the technique to clean their fields of weeds, pests and excess straw.

Most of the state's grass seed is grown in Linn County, but, because the prevailing winds in the summer are to the south, Lane County residents find themselves breathing the smoke.

"It's horse-and-buggy agricultural technology in a broadband, interconnected age," Eugene City Councilor Mike Clark said. "(Farmers) need to understand that the folks who live at this end of the valley think the practice needs to stop. It's no longer necessary, and we should stop it."

The Eugene City Council on Wednesday conducted a closed session with attorneys to discuss the possibility of joining Lane County in a lawsuit against grass seed growers and, perhaps, the state.

The council adjourned the closed session with no announcement regarding the litigation.

Clark said after the meeting that he opposes a lawsuit and would prefer that the Legislature institute a burning ban.

City Councilor Betty Taylor said government should hurry up and make a decision. "I don't think we should fool around forever," she said.

Since 1968, the state and the grass seed growers have sponsored millions of dollars worth of research into alternatives to field burning.

Most farmers found other ways to clean their fields. Fewer than 10 percent of grass seed fields are burned each year.

"The question is: Is somebody with the requisite legal authority going to compel

(farmers) to utilize these (alternatives) even if it's slightly less convenient than burning the fields?" said Dan Galpern, attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center in Eugene.

The Lane County Board of Commissioners tried unsuccessfully last year to get the state Legislature and the state's environmental-policy setting board, the Environmental Quality Commission, to ban field burning based on how it affects residents with asthma and other breathing disorders.

This week, the county is launching a quarter-million-dollar feasibility study to find out whether the Linn County farmers' waste straw can be converted into energy-producing methane or ethanol.

That study, involving three universities, two state agencies and numerous researchers and private contractors, begins in the coming weeks and is expected to be completed by December.

The commissioners asked: "Could there be an economic incentive for the grass straw not to be burned?" said research project manager Mike McKenzie-Bahr, a county economic development official. "Their objective is to eliminate this smoke that comes into Lane County."

The Oregon Seed Council, lobbying arm of the grass seed industry, approved of the study and contributed to the grant that's paying for the research. Oregon Seed Council Secretary Dave Nelson did not respond to requests for comment.

One initiative in the study is to examine whether it would be feasible to mix the grass seed farmers' straw with Eugene residents' food scraps in an anaerobic digester to produce methane that could be used to create electricity.

Meanwhile, the Environmental Quality Commission today will hear a report about the state Department of Environmental Quality's plans to conduct a formal review of the medical literature about sicknesses caused or exacerbated by exposure to the particulate in all kinds of smoke. The commission oversees the DEQ.

Department toxicologist Bruce Hope will consider whether the state should have more stringent rules governing the amount of particulate in the air than the standards the federal government set last year.

Opponents of field burning say there's already enough evidence that the smoke is harmful and the commission has been remiss in allowing the practice to continue.

Continuing to burn "will cause needless, and in some cases, extreme suffering in people with bronchitis and asthma and chronic lung disease," attorney Galpern said.

"They need relief now. Not after there's additional studies or additional technological developments. There's no reason for them to suffer that additional insult this coming summer," he said.

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