

## Field burning returns to legislative agenda

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It wouldn't be a legislative session without a debate about field burning.

Hearings begin this week on a pair of bills that would either ban the practice immediately or during a three-year period.

Willamette Valley farmers have long burned away grass seed stubble to kill off weeds and pests. The practice, growers say, has helped Oregon become the world's largest producer of grass seed.

The state supplies nearly 50 percent of the seed that's used to grow grass on soccer fields, golf courses and lawns around the globe.

But the burning fills the air with smoke, prompting hundreds of complaints each summer, many from asthma sufferers.

House Bill 2183, from Gov. Ted Kulongoski, calls for a reduction in the amount of acres that can be burned next year. In 2011, burning would be banned.

Senate Bill 528 calls for an immediate ban on field burning. Rep. Paul Holvey, D-Eugene, said he wrote the bill because a phased-in elimination of the practice is unnecessary and dangerous to public health.

His view is shared by state Sen. Floyd Prozanski, a fellow Eugene Democrat.

"There's no justification for it to be phased out in another three years," Prozanski told The Register-Guard.

Grass seed growers say a severe recession is not the time to pass legislation that would hurt their industry. Roger Beyer, the executive secretary for the Oregon Seed Council, said an outright ban would lead to less profit for farmers and lower tax revenues for the state.

Field burning has been a divisive issue for decades, most dramatically in 1988, when the smoke caused a 23-car pileup on Interstate 5 near Albany, killing seven people. The 1991 Legislature responded by capping the amount of acres that could be burned.

Holvey sponsored a bill to ban the practice two years ago, but vociferous opposition from farmers helped stop it. With Democrats now in firm control of both legislative chambers, speculation has grown that this could be the year when a ban passes.