

Field-burning debate reignites

By Brad Cain

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With her two preschoolers in tow, Stayton resident Stephanie Jorgensen tearfully pleaded with lawmakers to protect her children from the effects of those towering columns of smoke that rise up from Willamette Valley grass-seed farms each summer.

"We don't want our children's lungs to be exposed" to the smoke, Jorgensen said. "We know that field burning can harm our children and create a lifetime of respiratory problems."

Jorgensen's plea came as the House Health Care Committee heard emotional testimony from both sides about Gov. Ted Kulongoski's plan to end field burning by Oregon grass-seed farmers by 2011.

Grass-seed industry officials said field burning accounts for an insignificant amount of particulate pollution. And farmers testified Wednesday that they don't suffer any ill effects when they're surrounded by smoke during field burns.

Eric Bowers, a fourth-generation grass-seed farmer from Harrisburg, said he has had asthma since he was a small boy "and in all the years I have burnt fields I have never had field burning smoke cause me an asthma attack."

The phase-out plan being advanced by the governor is aimed at giving the industry time to find alternatives before field burning is outlawed in 2011. A separate bill pending in the Senate calls for halting the practice immediately.

Either way, backers of the bills say field burning threatens public health and needs to be outlawed. The bills are expected to produce one of the toughest environmental debates of the 2009 legislative session.

Spokesmen for Oregon's seed industry say field burning helps Oregon's growers maintain their competitive edge in worldwide markets by producing some of the purest grass seed available.

Oregon Seed Council leader Roger Beyer said proponents of the bills haven't produced data to show how many people are made ill by field burning.

"It's all theoretical," Beyer said.

People who live downwind from the fields say that smoke intrusions from the fires force them to deal with choking smoke that makes it tough to breathe and causes health problems for people who suffer from asthma and other respiratory ailments.

The Western Environmental Law Center, which is working to end field burning, said there's no dispute that field burning smoke is filled with fine particulate matter that when inhaled deep into



Timm Collins | Statesman Journal file
The health effects of burning grass-seed fields, such as this one between Silverton and Stayton, were debated at a public meeting Wednesday.

the lungs "can reduce lung function and lead to premature death."

The debate about field burning intensified after a 1988 chain-reaction traffic wreck near Albany that claimed seven lives after a field burn blazed out of control, enveloping Interstate 5 with dense smoke.