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Ban sought on burning state's grass seed fields

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EUGENE — If air clear of the smoke from burning fields is a good thing for the Olympic athletes in town for 10 days, it ought to be a good thing for the people who live in the Eugene region year-round, environmentalists argue.

They've asked Gov. Ted Kulongoski to ban burning grass-seed stubble after the Olympic Track and Field Trials, which begin Friday at Hayward Field.

Farmers agreed to suspend burning stubble during the trials.

"It's not fair to protect only elite athletes," said Charlie Tebbutt, staff attorney at the Western Environmental Law Center in Eugene. "Those of us who live here the rest of the time deserve the same protection."

The request revives a long controversy over the effect of the smoke on the residents of the upper end of the Willamette Valley, especially those with asthma or other respiratory disease.

Twenty years ago a cloud of smoke drifted over Interstate 5 causing a traffic pileup that left seven dead.

Since then, farmers have reduced the number of acres they burn to clear fields of stubble and to reduce weeds and pests. They burned 250,000 acres a year in the 1980s, and now the number averages about 50,000 acres annually.

But burning remains the best option for many growers to prepare their fields, said John Byers, head of the smoke management program for the state Department of Agriculture.

He said it is common for the state to stop issuing permits during major festivals.

Kulongoski wants to end field burning but not immediately.

"He will introduce legislation to reduce the practice" and plans a task force to look at alternatives, said spokeswoman Anna Richter Taylor said.

Grass growers say their good deed has left them open to more restrictions.

" 'No good deed goes unpunished' I guess is the category that goes into," said Dave Nelson, who serves as executive secretary of the Oregon Seed Council.

“We were asked by Olympic organizers in Eugene and the county government if we would voluntarily not burn during the trials,” Nelson said. “We agreed. Absolutely.”

“We’re trying to be good guys, and they poke an arrow in us,” Nelson said.

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