



The Oregonian

Our health shouldn't be going up in smoke

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Field-burning time is nearly here again, an annual practice that produces smoke harmful to the health of many Oregonians, especially those in the southern Willamette Valley.

This year, the Oregon Seed Council has agreed to suspend field burning until the conclusion of the U.S. Olympic trials for track and field, which begin this week in Eugene. We in Lane County appreciate the council's recognition of the adverse impacts of field-burning smoke to the health of athletes and the viability of these economically important events. But what about the rest of us during the balance of the summer and fall?

In pressing for an agreement with growers, Eugene's leaders were motivated by concerns that the city's image as Track Town USA might go up in smoke. More importantly, the Eugene City Council acted out of concern for the safety of more than 1,000 of the nation's top athletes and thousands of fans. These guests should not have to breathe toxic plumes while competing or attending this world-class athletic event.

But those same concerns that compelled the suspension of field burning will remain after the trials are over. Athletes will continue to train in our region in preparation for the Beijing Olympics and other competitions, including national, collegiate and Olympic events in the coming years. The public health threat from smoke in the southern Willamette Valley will be extreme as long as the current practices of field burning continue.

More than 2,000 studies make it clear that smoke from activities like field burning is extremely harmful to children's lungs, to the elderly and to people with pre-existing respiratory illness. Exposure to field-burning smoke has been implicated in acute asthma aggravation, reduced lung function, irregular heartbeat, heart attack and premature death in people with heart or lung disease.

Smoke management by the Oregon Department of Agriculture has proven to be guesswork at best. It has failed to prevent exposure of high concentrations of smoke to many residents and communities. Because of a lack of monitoring and the manipulation of averages and statistics, our state agencies refuse to smell the air and recognize the impacts to our health and communities. A telling statistic is that 40 percent of the fine particulate emissions in the entire Willamette Valley from approximately July through October are from field burning, and these emissions are most concentrated in the southern Willamette Valley.

In 2007, I introduced legislation to ban field burning and return smoke management to the Department of Environmental Quality. The evidence and the duty of the state of Oregon were presented to the Legislature, the governor and all appropriate agencies. The Oregon Medical Association, the American Lung Association, the Lane County Board of Commissioners, the city of Eugene and the House Health Care Committee all supported that legislation. But that support and the right of the people to safe air didn't match the political power of the Grass Seed Council.

In 1991, the Legislature directed the Department of Agriculture to reduce field burning and develop alternatives. But there have been no reductions since 1998. We cannot live any longer breathing the smoke from field burning. We must end this practice and implement alternatives.

Paul Holvey, a Democrat, represents Eugene in the Oregon House of Representatives.

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