



The Oregonian

Stamp out field burning

The Olympic trials ignite the question anew, but for those suffering through the sky-blackening smoke, it's never gone away

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The arrival of company often forces us to finish housekeeping projects we've long neglected. In Oregon, one such cleanup -- decades overdue -- is a total ban on field burning.

Idaho and Washington have put their bad old smoky days behind them. But, hard as it is to believe, grass seed growers in Oregon still engage in this noxious practice.

When the smoke pours out of fields, children, the elderly and asthmatic, healthy adults and the best athletes in the world alike all suffer the consequences. Remember Sept. 4, 1974?

Even though smoke obscured the length of Hayward Field, Steve Prefontaine didn't want to disappoint a thousand fans who'd shown up to watch him run a mile. He ran 3:58.3, his biographer and fellow runner, Kenny Moore, recalled last year, and "finished coughing blood."

A year later, Prefontaine, Moore, two other runners and legendary University of Oregon coach Bill Bowerman told the Oregon Legislature it ought to ban field burning. But it didn't shut the practice down. The state kept issuing permits.

Exactly 20 years ago this summer -- at 3 p.m. on Aug. 3, 1988 -- an Albany farmer with just such a permit lit 82 acres of grass seed stubble on fire.

The wind shifted, not an unusual occurrence, setting fire to another field adjacent to Interstate 5. At 3:50 p.m., pitch-black smoke engulfed the freeway, triggering a 21-vehicle pileup. Ten vehicles burst into flame, leaving 37 people injured and seven dead.

You would think this cataclysm might have silenced the debate, and ended all dilly-dallying by the Legislature.

You would be wrong.

True, field burning isn't as prevalent today, but 50,000 acres are still burned annually. Our state should have extinguished this practice long ago simply out of concern for the health of Oregonians. But sometimes self-regard is not enough. It can take the additional push of exposure -- averting shame and embarrassment -- to motivate action. The 2008 U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials, starting this week in Eugene, seems to be providing just such a push.

The trials should be an unadulterated source of pride for Oregon, with elite runners and fans arriving from all over the world. But plumes of smoke from field burning can turn the most idyllic Oregon landscape into a mini-Beijing.

Out of concern for the state's image, as well as respect for the lungs of our guests, grass seed growers

have pledged a temporary halt. (Just in case the pledge does not suffice, the state Department of Agriculture has backed it up with a decision not to issue burn permits.) This is all very nice. But the industry's thoughtfulness has sparked a new debate: Don't the lungs of Oregonians deserve the same respect as those of our honored guests?

Not-so-elite lungs are equally worthy of consideration. In the 2009 session, the Legislature should put an end to field burning once and for all.

When it happens, some of the credit will belong to the fastest runners in the world. But no one will be able to accuse the Legislature of speed.

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