
Study tracks no-burn methods

By Diane Dietz

The Register-Guard

Published: Thursday, August 16, 2007

Forces trying to stop - and also those trying to continue - field burning are likely to cite a crop study out of Oregon State University to support their case today before the Environmental Quality Commission.

Lawyers trying to stop field burning on behalf of Lane County are likely to say that the 10-year study shows it's possible to grow grass seed without field burning.

Farmers who use a system that includes leaving straw on the fields - rather than burning it away - get higher yields at lower costs, and the method protects their soil from erosion, according to results highlighted in the July issue of the Agricultural Research Service magazine.

But grass seed industry officials will use the same study as evidence that the industry is scrambling to find alternatives to field burning but still needs to preserve the practice at the current 50,000 acres-per-year rate for some farmers with difficult soils.

"Everybody is trying to do other things besides burning, but it's not a cookie cutter. One size doesn't fit all," said Dave Nelson, executive secretary of the Oregon Seed Council industry group.

Foes of field burning launched two major efforts to stop the practice on the basis of a health hazard to populations - including children with undeveloped lungs and asthmatics - breathing in the fine particulate in smoke.

Rep. Paul Holvey, D-Eugene, pushed an ultimately unsuccessful bill to ban field burning in the Legislature last spring. And, in June, the Lane County Board of Commissioners petitioned the state Environmental Quality Commission to use its emergency powers to stop field burning this summer.

The commission is scheduled to take testimony and to discuss the issue today.

The OSU study came to light in the thick of the controversy and its findings added fuel to the political fire.

The study was conducted by Corvallis-based members of the federal Agricultural Research Service, who hold joint appointments on the university faculty.

The work was funded partially through a program established by the Oregon Legislature in the early 1990s to support research aimed at finding alternatives to field burning. That program put out \$2.7 million during the past nine years. About a dozen studies a year get grants.

In the OSU study, researchers tested various combinations of crop systems on 23

test plots in Linn, Benton and Marion counties during the span of a decade.

The researchers arrived at a combination of chopping the waste straw after harvest, seeding the next crop through the downed straw and growing other crops - such as clover or meadowfoam - on the fields during off years so the grass straw has time to decompose and not build up from year after year of growing grass.

And yields were good, the study found.

The results were not new to Willamette Valley grass seed farmers because some had watched the test plots grow and others had read parts of the findings metered out during the past two years.

During the past decade, many Willamette Valley grass seed farmers have leapt on variations of the "full-straw, no-till, mulching" method of growing grass seed, said George Mueller-Warrant, one of a half-dozen authors of the paper.

"Obviously, farmers have figured out they can produce crops without burning," he said. "The total acreage grown has gone up over the last 15 years, and yet the amount that's burned has gone down quite a ways."

In 2006, Oregon grass seed farmers grew 525,460 acres of grass seed and they used fire to clear only 49,071 acres of fields after harvest - or less than 10 percent.

"We're chopping it. We're grinding it. We're planting through it. We're doing all kinds of stuff," Nelson said.

The grass seed farmers are spurred by government payments through the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. The farmers can get between \$30 and \$40 per acre per year for three years if they try the no-till and mulching methods like those described in the OSU paper. Dozens of Willamette Valley farmers are participating.

Amity farmer Bruce Ruddenklau has managed his 800-acre operation using the crop rotation, straw preserving, no-till methods during the past six years.

He's not opposed to field burning, but he says it may be overused in the south valley. Ruddenklau said he burned his last field five years ago.

"The net result didn't really gain us anything. It's really not anything I think of as a management tool anymore."

He's pleased with the change in the soil since he's used the alternate cropping system.

"The organic material is really helping the characteristic of the soil. The earthworms are improving. The ability of the soil to hold water is improving," he said.

It's trickier for farmers in the south valley - near Eugene - to switch to the no-till

methods. They grow a lot of annual rye grass seed, which fetches about half as much per pound of other grass varieties grown in Oregon, meaning the farmers have less leeway to experiment, Mueller-Warrant said.

Still, farmers manage to raise all but 20 percent of their annual rye grass acres without burning.

"Without question, if you raise a crop and you burn it and you remove all the material year after year after year, you are depleting the soil of organic material and essentially it's making the drainage situation that much worse - that's a fair statement," Ruddenklau said.

"A lot of growers have switched to plowing down the rye grass straw and have found that - over time - the soil has greatly improved. The organic material has built up and every year it gets a little easier to plow," he said.

FIELD BURNING BAN

The Environmental Quality Commission will discuss Lane County's request to end annual burning of spent grass seed fields, which creates clouds of smoke that sometimes drift into cities and towns

When and where: The all-day meeting begins at 9:30 a.m. today at the EcoTrust Conference Center in Portland. The commission will discuss the matter in closed session with its attorney and will later take public comment and discuss the practice in open session. The times are unspecified.

Information: 503-229-5301, ext. 6725.

Sponsored Links

ADVERTISING

AARP Auto Ins Quotes

Over 50? Save \$303 On Auto Ins With The Hartford. Free No Hassle Quote
AARP.TheHartford.com

Movie Magic DVDs

Create custom Hollywood-style DVDs using your own pictures!
www.trynow.myphotomax.com

Refinance at 5.35% Fixed

Get \$300,000 loan for \$875/month. Calculate Your New Payment. Act Now!
Refinance.LoanOffer.com

How's your credit score?

0-500 Poor, 501-700 Average, 701+ Good. Find out your score now FREE!
CreditReport.com

[Buy a link here](#)