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Panel snuffs field-burning ban

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PORTLAND - After hearing testimony laced with jabs at Eugene, along with claims the public's health is at risk, the state Environmental Quality Commission declined to order an immediate ban on field burning based on research that smoke endangers people's lungs.

In a series of 4-0 votes Thursday, the commission ordered state environmental officials next February to seek money from the Legislature to study the effects of breathing smoke and whether there are feasible, economical and environmentally sound alternatives to field burning.

Eugene attorney Dan Galpern decried the votes as a "weak" response to the Lane County Board of Commissioner's plea for an immediate ban. The actions amounted to the commission delaying and shirking its legal duties to protect citizens from health hazards of field burning, including lung and heart disease, Galpern said.

The decision will mean one and probably two more summers of field smoke before the commission can act, he said. Lane County and the Western Environmental Law Center will consider other means of stopping the practice, including seeking a court stay, he said.

Sixty people attended the session at the Portland EcoTrust building Thursday. They included more than a dozen farmers in short-sleeved plaid shirts and blue jeans, most of whom sat with their arms crossed across their chests.

The farmers said they know of no legitimate health hazard created by exposure to the thick smoke of field burning - either among them, their employees or "older folk" in the community who have been around it all their lives.

Grass seed farmer Dennis Taylor said city people have said they get sick from field burning when they haven't breathed in smoke. "People see the smoke, and they say, 'Oh, it's making my asthma act up,' and they just see it," he said.

Oregon Seed Council Executive Secretary Dave Nelson singled out Eugene's mayor as unreasonable and unwilling to work with farmers.

Last month, Nelson presented Mayor Kitty Piercy with a 1979 memorandum of understanding between the seed council and the city that called for cooperation and a desire to eliminate animosity between the two.

On that basis, Nelson asked Piercy to withdraw the city's support for a ban on field burning.

In a letter sent in late July, Piercy refused, saying that field burning is "extremely dangerous to all of Oregon's citizens." She did, however, say she continues to

support the desire to eliminate the animosity.

But Nelson wasn't buying it.

"She essentially said, 'Buzz off. We're not interested in working with you. We're going to continue to attack you,'" Nelson told the environmental commission.

The farmers said Eugene residents are hypocrites because city crews burned invasive weeds in Awbrey Park and grasses in the West Eugene Wetlands.

"When a grass seed farmer burns their fields, it's unnecessary and evil," grower Eric Bowers said.

Oregon Farm Bureau Federation President Barry Bushue was angered that the commission was considering banning field burning for about a week next summer when Eugene hosts the Olympic Trials in track and field.

"I'm incensed there's a group of people prepared to trade off a long-standing, multigeneration group of people - farmers - for a few million dollars, a track and a fancy water fountain," he said, referring to preparations for the event.

"It's unbelievable we're placing a handful of elitist athletes ahead of a long-standing agricultural people who make their living and their livelihood (farming)," he said.

But Nelson said farmers would hold off burning until two days after the Trials are through. He said it's been their practice to clear the skies for events such as Junction City's Scandinavian Festival and the Sweet Home Jubilee.

Commission member Ken Williamson said it's not the commission's intention to insult farmers. He said Eugene is just trying to be a good host.

"They're inviting these people to come to the state of Oregon. Like inviting any guests to your house, you don't want to offend them," he said.

Some farmers cast dark aspersions on Eugene's political stripes, saying people who object to field burning believe "profit" is a dirty word.

Those seeking to ban field burning aren't environmentalists but "extreme radicals," Taylor said.

"These radical people just don't like field burning," he said. "I think the wrong group is accused of blowing smoke."

Faye Stewart, Lane County commissioner, signed the most recent letter asking the Environmental Quality Commission for a swift ban on field burning.

"I don't think either I or Faye Stewart are wild-eyed extremists," Galpern, the attorney, said after the meeting. "We're interested in providing some minimal protections from (smoke) in the southern Willamette Valley."

Galpern and Carla Hervert, a cardiac rehabilitation therapist, presented the stories of 19 Lane County residents who have found themselves gasping from exposure to field burning.

Many are stuck at home through field burning season, Hervert said. They can't make it to rehab because the danger of exposure is too great. They have to redouble their medications to maintain their breath, facing increased side effects.

"I've been working with these people for over 10 years," Hervert testified in a quavering voice. "They're part of my family, and I see them suffer."

Eugene lung specialist Robert Carolan said the ban has the support of the Oregon Medical Association, the Oregon Lung Association and the Lane County Medical Society.

National studies documenting the harm in smoke is robust, he said, and Oregon is not going to improve on them with a comparatively small analysis.

State Rep. Paul Holvey, D-Eugene, told the commissioners that he's frustrated because politicians and the public have been "inoculated" from understanding the harm in smoke by industry lobbying that dismisses it as "a runny nose and sore throat."

"I believe it's an extreme health hazard, particularly to the people of the south Willamette Valley," he said.

Industry representatives expressed frustration, too. However, theirs was directed at what they see as an increasing number of city dwellers who want to dictate farm practices.

"You can't have a state that makes agriculture a priority philosophically and then pragmatically does everything it can to undermine what we're trying to do," Bushue said.

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