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A limit, if not a ban: Field burning faces increasing constraints  
A Register-Guard Editorial  
Published: Saturday, August 18, 2007

Willamette Valley grass seed growers won a round Thursday when the state Environmental Quality Commission voted unanimously against the Lane County Board of Commissioners' request for a ban on open field burning. The growers may feel they're on a winning streak, having also defeated a proposed ban in the 2007 Legislature. But even if no ban is imposed, field burning faces a future of ever-tightening limits. A variety of factors are converging to restrict the practice.

First is the EQC itself. In rejecting a ban, the commission ordered the Department of Environmental Quality to seek legislative funding for a study of the health effects of field burning, as well as a survey of alternative methods of clearing and sanitizing fields. If it's found that public health is affected, or that some or all growers could employ alternative methods, the commission will be forced to respond.

Second, opponents of field burning aren't radicals, despite some growers' attempts to portray them as such. Among the most determined opponents are the Oregon Lung Association and the Oregon Medical Association, which hints at the direction a study of health effects will go. Nor is opposition restricted to Eugene, despite efforts to characterize opponents as urban elitists. It was Lane County, not Eugene, that requested the ban. Rural communities throughout the Willamette Valley and the Cascade foothills are affected by field burning smoke and are increasingly vocal in their complaints.

Third, the grass seed industry is thriving, despite a steep reduction in field burning since phase-downs first won legislative approval three decades ago. At the same time, open field burning is being either banned or tightly controlled in other states. Growers' warnings of fatal economic damage are undercut by the experience in Oregon and elsewhere.

Grass seed growers also must confront a problem of timing. Complaints would be fewer if the fields were burned in February. Field burning in late summer affects the skies at a time when many people are, or would like to be, outdoors, and many events are scheduled. The growers must understand that even if field burning were found to be a purely aesthetic problem, it would be a problem nonetheless. The reluctance expressed at the EQC meeting to suspend field burning during next year's Olympic Trials was particularly impolitic.

Finally, alternatives to burning are coming into view. A market for straw from grass seed fields already exists in Asia. A second market could appear domestically if interest in cellulose-based ethanol continues to grow. Most Oregon grass seed is already produced on fields that are not burned.

The growers can offer some persuasive arguments. It's manifestly true that most air pollution in the Willamette Valley comes from cars and trucks, not field fires. It's also true that fireplaces and wood stoves are the cause of most smoke-related

pollution problems. Grass seed growers often are wrongly blamed for smoke from forest fires or slash burning.

But these are arguments against other types of air pollution, not for field burning. The EQC's decision notwithstanding, field burning's future is increasingly constrained.