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### Advocates urge field burn warning

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Health authorities don't give the public fair warning so people can protect themselves from noxious smoke when farmers torch their fields, the foes of the agricultural practice said Thursday.

The smoke is "highly damaging" to people with respiratory disease, the elderly and children, said Dan Galpern, co-director of the newly constituted Campaign to End Field Burning group.

"Avoidance is the most important precaution people can take," he said in a news event staged in front of PeaceHealth's new RiverBend hospital entrance.

Each year, about 150 Oregon grass seed farmers clear about 50,000 acres — after harvest — of straw and pests by touching a flame to the yellow, dry grass stocks. The burns send clouds of smoke high into the air, and sometimes the winds cause the smoke to settle back down on the ground.

So far this year, about 20,000 acres have been burned. The 30,000-acre balance is likely to be burned on a handful of days between now and when the rains start in late September, state records show.

"The worst is yet to come," Galpern said.

Health authorities at the state and local levels say warning the public ahead of field burning is a good idea.

"While long-term exposure to fine particles is dangerous for everyone, most people can tolerate a short-term exposure to higher concentrations. But if you have asthma, it's a different situation and potentially life threatening," said Andy Ginsburg, who, working within the Department of Environmental Quality, oversees the state's air quality.

Lane County health officer Dr. Sarah Hendrickson said a warning would be a "really good" idea. The particulate in smoke goes deep into the lungs, she said.

"It's those little bits that sit down there in the air sacs and cause long-term damage like cancer and stuff, but it also irritates those teeny tiny airways and make them squinch (up), which is what happens in asthma, and you can't get the air in and out

of the lungs,” Hendrickson said.

However, despite their message of support, the health officers say their hands are tied because they have no money for an early warning field burning system.

The Department of Environmental Quality will ask the 2009 Legislature for money to do the job, Ginsburg said.

Hendrickson, in Lane County, said she has higher priorities.

“Right now, Lane County Public Health is so beleaguered trying to take care of our basic job of tracking down tuberculosis and sexually transmitted diseases and dead babies that we hardly have room for anything else — and STDs are up,” she said.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture’s smoke management program does try to give some notice when it authorizes a burn, program manager John Byers said.

First, it posts on its Web site each day whether burning is not likely, possible or likely.

But Byers makes the actual decision to authorize a burn on a very short time line — when the wind height, wind speed and wind direction are likely to carry the smoke out of the valley.

“We issue a permit and the farmer has one hour to light the field. It’s very hard to give the community advanced warning ... I know it frustrates the public that we can’t give them more advanced notice, but I have a hard enough time predicting the weather two hours from now much less 24 hours from now.”

The Oregon Seed Council, which speaks and lobbies on behalf of farmers, was unavailable for comment on Thursday. But officials have said previously that no alternatives exist that would not increase the use of fuel, erosion, dust and pesticide.

The current summer field burning season, which began in July, has generated 231 complaints to the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

A burn near Creswell on Aug. 12 dropped blackened straw on the small town about 10 miles south of Eugene-Springfield. A few people called 911 to report the smoke. More than two dozen called the Lane Regional Air Protection Agency.

Patrons at the Creswell Coffee Company came in from a patio to escape the falling cinders. Employees ran out to roll up their car windows. A monstrous plume of smoke rose in the sky, owner Paul Nordquist said.

“What I like to do is tell the real reality. Field burning created a pretty ugly situation that day,” he said.

The situation was potentially dangerous for some residents, Galpern said.

“If cinders are falling you know the fine particulate matter has engulfed that community,” he said.

The Campaign to End Field Burning is directed by Galpern and attorney Charlie Tebbutt from the Western Environmental Law Center.

They are soliciting public money and political action, and circulating a petition to present to the governor and the Legislature that demands an end to field burning.

PeaceHealth has not taken a position on field burning but allowed the campaign to stage its news event in front of its new hospital because the campaign was promoting a health message and, also, because the group could have conducted the event on the public sidewalk nearby without the hospital’s permission, anyway, a spokeswoman said.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski earlier ordered preparation of a bill that would require a phase down in field burning over the next seven or eight years.

Kulongoski has not yet determined dates and size of the reductions, Ginsburg said.

State Rep. Paul Holvey, D-Eugene, meanwhile, led a push in the 2007 Legislature to ban field burning immediately, and he’s likely to do the same in 2009.

The Lane County Medical Society is supporting the campaign for a ban, stating in its endorsement letter that a ban would “materially advance public health.”

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