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Guest Viewpoint: State missed chance on field burning

By Lisa Arkin

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An all too familiar scenario played itself out at last week's meeting of the Oregon Environmental Quality Commission.

Earlier this summer, the Lane County Board of Commissioners asked the commission to impose a two-year moratorium on Willamette Valley field burning. Like the 2007 Legislature and legislatures before it, the EQC stepped adroitly to the side, avoiding its responsibility to protect public health.

The EQC opted to recommend that the state Department of Environmental Quality "request resources" from the Legislature to "study the health effects and alternatives to field burning."

In her Aug. 22 guest viewpoint, DEQ Director Stephanie Hallock observed that deliberative processes take time and that "this will undoubtedly be disappointing to many." No one could disagree with that. Will a pat on the head and the promise of future studies heal a person who is having serious difficulty breathing right now?

Commission members said they didn't yet have enough information to tease out what part of Lane County's documented particulate pollution problem is a result of field burning, vehicle exhaust or home wood stoves. While more time could be spent quantifying percentages, DEQ air quality data already suggest that field burning contributes to more than 40 percent of averaged particulate pollution during field burn days.

A large body of evidence links particulate matter of the type emitted by field burning in the Willamette Valley with severe health effects. A recent study funded by the federal Environmental Protection Agency looked at the relationship between agricultural burning, air pollution and illness in Idaho. The startling results revealed that an increase of 10 micrograms per cubic meter in the daily concentration of small airborne particles (PM 2.5) was associated with an 11 percent increase in the number of acute stroke health care encounters. That's an astounding increase in stroke risk.

Exactly such an increase in PM 2.5 air pollution occurred in Eugene on July 10, the day a small field burn near Harrisburg went awry on the hottest day of the summer. Similar scenarios occurred on Aug. 7 in Lyons and on Aug. 8 in Sweet Home.

There are also plenty of studies on alternatives to burning that the EQC could have used to inform its deliberations. Oregon State University has been a leader in identifying alternative grass seed farming practices. The research team in OSU's Department of Crop and Soil Sciences has participated in numerous studies that show that growing grass seed crops without open-field burning does not reduce seed purity or productivity.

According to Tom Chastain of OSU's Department of Crop and Soil Science, "This finding refutes one of the major concerns of seed producers that field burning alternatives would not only lower seed quality but that this problem would be exacerbated in aging stands."

In a 10-year study funded by the State Department of Agriculture, the suitability of direct seeding through straw residue was determined to provide numerous benefits to grass seed farmers. Not only was grass seed yield unaffected by employing no-burn methods, the authors also found that these same practices readily can be employed on large scale grass seed farms here in the Pacific Northwest.

Why replicate such extensive research? The 2000 peer-reviewed medical studies and the region-specific agricultural studies are both compelling and directly applicable to Willamette Valley grass seed practices.

The take-away message is that, even if more studies were desirable, Lane County's request for a two-year moratorium should have been granted based on the available evidence. The commission also would have given a much needed push to reluctant state lawmakers to take the issue more seriously.

A moratorium would prevent future calls such as the ones Oregon Toxics Alliance received July 10 from parents in west Eugene and Junction City who were scrambling to find ways to protect their children. The air quality monitor in Amazon Park showed a spike that doubled the amount of PM 2.5, air pollution from small particulates, just as the smoke hit Eugene.

In one case, a parent had to rush her disabled child into a car and drive away from the rolling smoke clouds, causing considerable distress for the vulnerable child and the concerned mother. A pregnant woman with asthma left the area because she was afraid that she would have to use her nebulizer for her breathing difficulties, something she was trying to avoid during pregnancy. A medical center employee was rushed to the emergency room with life-threatening breathing difficulties, resulting in missed work and loss of wages.

Director Hallock was right about disappointment. The summer of 2007 will be remembered as the summer of our discontent, the summer that officials had the opportunity to act upon the pleas of valley residents, county health officials, state medical associations and medical professionals to avert a community health hazard - but chose instead to listen while a select few grass seed farmers and their lobbyist cast aspersions on the motives behind those pleas and suggested that these pleas were nothing but hot air.

A concurrent moratorium on burning, while lawmakers haggle over the cost of more studies, would have affirmed that the true issue before us is the human cost of constricted lungs, strokes and heart disease, a cost that can never be recovered.

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*Lisa Arkin of Eugene is the executive director of the Oregon Toxics Alliance.*

