
Field burning study questioned

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Researchers hope to answer this hot question: Does the field burning smoke that billows in the Willamette Valley skies each summer really hurt the people who catch a lung full of it?

The \$94,000 study by Oregon State University researchers doesn't even start until October, but the critics already are asking whether the study will yield objective, scientific results given the study's genesis. The study is being funded with money from grass seed farmers who burn their fields.

State Rep. Paul Holvey, D-Eugene, said the link to the industry raises questions about the study's validity. "There's an interest of OSU to come out with a finding that's conducive to the grass seed industry, because they get money from the grass seed industry," said Holvey, a critic of the field burning. "It does cast a shadow in my mind that this particular study may - or may not - be totally unbiased."

But OSU toxicologist Dave Stone, one of two researchers doing the study, said the upfront agreement is that nobody gets to influence the results. "We've been pretty honest that the numbers fall where the numbers fall. Our job is not to massage numbers at all," he said.

The researchers find themselves working in a maelstrom of controversy surrounding the practice of some grass seed growers of torching the grass stalks after the seed crop is harvested.

Citing studies that link breathing smoke with reduced lung function, heart attacks and - in rare cases - death, Holvey sought a ban on field burning this year, first from the Legislature and later from the state Environmental Quality Commission.

The Legislature failed to act on Holvey's ban proposal.

The environmental commission, which has the authority to issue a ban based on health dangers, said last month that it lacked enough information about the health hazards of breathing the smoke to act. The commission instead decided to ask the Legislature for money for the state Department of Environmental Quality to conduct a study.

Meanwhile, the state Department of Agriculture launched the plan for the OSU study - to be funded with fees the state collects from the minority of valley grass seed growers who still burn their fields.

The study will use existing data on smoke concentrations and health effects to assess the risk to people encountering field smoke under several different scenarios. It will calculate the odds for cancer and non-cancerous health problems, such as lung irritations and illnesses.

The results could help the EQC make its ruling on the potential dangers of field burning, DEQ air quality official Andy Ginsburg said. "If they do the study right," he said, "it could help move the ball down the court."

But critics say a unit of the OSU College of Agricultural Sciences may not be the best place for research on health effects of an agricultural practice.

"Why wasn't this put out for a public bid?" said Dan Galpern, an attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center in Eugene. "If you're going to do a study on this important public issue, there should be some confidence in those who are going to do the study."

John Byers of the Oregon Department of Agriculture said the researchers proposed the study and won support for their proposal.

Deepening the skepticism was a report in the last Legislative session by state Rep. Sara Gelser, D-Corvallis, that an unnamed employee of the OSU agricultural college lobbied her to oppose Holvey's bill to ban field burning.

Gelser said she understood from the employee that the opposition to the bill was not an official OSU position, but rather an unofficial point of view.

Such lobbying creates the appearance of bias, Holvey said. "Before they'd heard any health impacts or consequences of field burning, they'd already made up their mind," he said.

Stone and Jeffrey Jenkins, the second researcher on the study, work in the college's Department of Environmental and Molecular Toxicity, which otherwise conducts research on the safe use of pesticides.

Stone joined the faculty in March. For the five years previous, he worked for the Oregon Department of Human Services in Portland.

As a public health toxicologist, Stone had studied potential health effects at the J.H. Baxter creosoting plant in Eugene and mercury laden fish in lakes and reservoirs throughout the state.

No OSU colleagues have tried to influence the new study on health and field burning, Stone said. "Not at all. I've had no internal pressure whatsoever on this, and I hope that's the way it stays," he said.

On the other hand, without Stone's knowledge, the Oregon Department of Agriculture sent copies of his field burning study proposal to about one dozen grass seed growers who serve on an alternatives-to-field-burning research committee, for their approval.

Ninety percent of those farmers approved of the study - and the other 10 percent didn't vote - according to Dave Nelson, executive secretary of the Oregon Seed Council.

The ODA did not send the study proposal for review by the Oregon Lung Specialists or the Oregon Medical Association, two organizations that oppose field burning on health grounds.

"One would expect for any study to have legitimacy - if they were getting any feedback from outside organizations - they would attempt to have balance," Galpern said.

Nelson's response to that criticism: "We tried to cover that base - and I insisted - that the Department of Environmental Quality and the Department of Health be in on the final review of the project."

But Stone, the researcher, said what matters most is how the end results of the study are handled. No outside groups will be allowed to preview or alter the results, he said.

"We wouldn't be doing our job as a university if that was allowed to happen," he said. "That's not how this is going to happen."

BURNS SO FAR

Gov. Ted Kulongoski keeps a close watch on field burning in the Willamette Valley. He receives weekly reports on the number of acres burned, the number of complaints received by authorities and the number of smoke intrusions measured at a handful of air monitors. Here are statistics through Sept. 2 with about half of the year's acreage burned. The burn season continues through September.

Acres burned: 21,981

Total complaints received: 728 (including 338 complaints from Eugene)

Officially registered intrusions: eight, occurring in Corvallis, Lyons and Sweet Home

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