



The Oregonian

Final curtain for field burning

The governor offers a sensible plan to put public health ahead of the cheapest way of clearing grass-seed acreage

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The era of open field burning in the Willamette Valley should have ended in the 20th century.

Tom McCall was the first to try ending it nearly 40 years ago. On Eugene's infamous "Black Tuesday," Aug. 12, 1969, the Republican governor visited the smoke-enshrouded city and declared an emergency ban on field burning, and legislators soon passed a complete phase-out of the practice.

But grass-seed growers fought back, warning darkly that an end to field burning would mean the end of their industry. They blocked the phase-out, and long after McCall died, residents of Eugene and other valley communities continued to choke on summer smoke.

Inevitably, disaster struck. Twenty years ago, on Aug. 3, 1988, blinding smoke from a Linn County field fire caused a 23-vehicle pileup on Interstate 5, killing seven people and injuring 38.

That spawned yet another legislative phase-down and yet another round of dire warnings from the seed growers.

It turns out those warnings were wrong. Willamette Valley grass-seed production, despite a sharp curtailment of open burning since the early 1970s, has grown into a \$500 million industry, making Oregon the world's biggest and best producer of seed for lawns, parks and golf courses.

But thousands of acres are still being burned each summer, spawning hundreds of complaints from Oregonians suffering from asthma and other respiratory ailments. Eugene-area physicians have stepped up their demands for an end to the burning, yet the well-financed lobby for the growers has the gall to claim the medical community is wrong about the public health hazards of their field smoke.

Enough, says Gov. Ted Kulongoski, and he's right. He intends to introduce a bill in the 2009 Legislature to cut the acreage that Willamette Valley seed growers can burn by 50 percent in 2010 and eliminate burning altogether in 2011.

His plan is reasonable and long overdue. As a result of years of research and improved farming techniques, the grass-seed industry has come up with effective alternatives to burning fields each year to kill off weeds and pests and to sanitize the soil for the next planting.

Willamette Valley grass-seed growers, aided by scientists from Oregon State University, deserve a lot of credit for these advances. They have built their industry into an economic powerhouse while proving that it could be done without burning their fields.

Last year, only 7 percent of the valley's 460,000 acres of grass-seed fields were burned. Yet smoke from that 7 percent resulted in more than 1,100 complaints to public health agencies.

Oregon legislators should embrace the governor's bill. It won't end the Willamette Valley's reign as grass-seed capital of the world. But it will eliminate a public-health hazard that, 39 long years ago, Tom McCall could already see clearly through the smoke of Eugene.

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