

The Register Guard: Guest Viewpoint

Field burning ban long overdue; why wait longer?

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Published: September 30, 2008

Gov. Ted Kulongoski's recent acknowledgement that field burning smoke constitutes a serious threat to public health, coupled with the fact that alternatives to burning are readily available and currently employed by the majority of grass seed growers in Oregon and Washington, means that no one else should be forced to suffer through another season of field burning.

Enough is enough!

The Register-Guard's Sept. 7 editorial supporting the governor's new proposal to phase out field burning over three years is regrettable, because swifter protection is easily within reach.

We eagerly extend, on behalf of the Campaign to End Field Burning, our thanks to the governor for recognizing that field burning is an outdated and unhealthy practice that causes many Oregonians to suffer unnecessarily. But the protections afforded by ending field burning, which the governor proposes for 2011, are needed now for three primary reasons.

First, this is a matter of public health.

Dr. Robert Carolan of Oregon Lung Specialists reported in his Aug. 29 guest viewpoint that the smoke generated by field burning imposes serious risks to children, to the elderly and to persons with asthma or bronchitis. Increased exposure to fine particulates in field burning smoke also increases risks of heart attack and stroke. Scores of peer reviewed studies, many listed at www.EndFieldBurning.org, establish these facts.

Second, the grass seed industry has known that field burning was to be phased out since the infamous 1969 "Black Tuesday" that coated Eugene and the 1988 pileup on Interstate 5 near Albany that killed seven people, including two children, and caused numerous other injuries. These tragic events should have led to the end of field burning in Oregon.

Instead, in 1993, the Oregon Legislature merely reduced the amount of acres allowed to be burned and allocated millions of dollars to research field burning alternatives. The intent of the 1993 legislation was to ease the industry's transition to the inevitable end to field burning.

That was 15 years ago.

Third, ending field burning presents no undue hardship for growers.

Viable alternatives to field burning are available, as evidenced from their widespread use by a majority of growers. Indeed, Washington banned the practice in 1998, and growers there have continued to prosper.

Those in the vocal minority who still burn cast a negative light on the grass seed industry as a whole, while they benefit at the expense of the health and quality of life of tens of thousands of people.

Despite the overwhelming medical evidence and ready alternatives, ending field burning will not happen

simply because it makes common sense.

Last year, for example, state Rep. Paul Holvey, D-Eugene, pressed his bill to ban field burning through the Health Committee. Regrettably, heavy pressure by the organized grass seed industry resulted in the bill being suffocated in the House Agriculture Committee, so the bill never got to a full legislative vote. It is time to put public health before politics.

We are determined to succeed in the 2009 session, but we fully expect the industry to again attempt to misrepresent the issue as a conflict between urban elites and rural subsistence.

The plain truth of the matter, however, is that while the state's smoke management program attempts to limit impacts to highly populated regions of the Willamette Valley, in practice this means that rural communities become the sacrifice zones for regular smoke intrusions.

This is morally unacceptable given the state of clear medical knowledge, especially when alternatives exist that will protect the quality of life of all residents.

Legislative leaders need to understand that their constituents demand change now. They need to hear from parents who are forced to shutter their children indoors; from doctors and other health professionals whose patients needlessly suffer; from people who leave the Willamette Valley during burn season and from those who cannot: from runners and cyclists, whose training is impaired by heavy particulate pollution; and from the growers who have implemented alternatives that place them at a competitive disadvantage to burners.

Accordingly, we invite all readers to join with us to make 2008 the last year that anyone will have to suffer from field burning. In the balance resides community health and quality of life, whether rural or urban.

We must move now to protect all people in our common airshed.

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