

Coughing Blood

Prefontaine suffered from the effects of field burning

Steve Prefontaine finished every race he began in his career, except for one. The cause? Field burning.

Field burning by grass seed growers was a problem in the 1970s while Pre was racing and continues to plague elite athletes and everyday citizens in Lane County today. But the Lane County commissioners have requested that Oregon's Environmental Quality Commission (EQC) put an emergency stop to the smoke before burning begins in July.

According to Pre's biographer, Kenny Moore, Pre ran a race at Hayward Field in September 1974. Before the race began, "a wall of smoke" rolled in so thick you couldn't see across the field, Moore wrote in a letter to the commissioners.

Rather than disappoint the thousand fans who showed up to watch, Pre ran his race anyway. He finished in under four minutes, Moore wrote, but he was "coughing blood."

Two weeks later Pre pulled out of a race in England only two laps before the finish. The

gerous chemicals like dioxins."

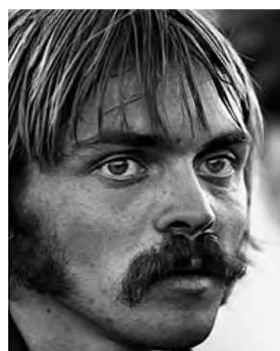
The effects of long-term, low level exposure to dioxins have not been established, but the EPA says high exposure to dioxins has shown increased risk of cancers and damage to reproductive, hormone and immune systems.

Arkin and others spoke before the county commissioners last week about the dangers of the smoke produced by field burning. The commissioners voted to ask the EQC to order an end to burning for two years. The ban would improve the air for the Olympic trials coming to Eugene in 2008.

This action follows the failure of a ban on field burning in the state Legislature without going to vote in late April.

"This is not a political issue; this is a scientific and a medical issue," said Charlie Tebbutt, attorney for the Western Environmental Law Center. He cited the health impacts to vulnerable populations such as children and the elderly.

The EQC has a duty, Tebbutt said, "to pro-



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hacking from his smoke inhalation in Eugene had torn muscle fibers under his rib cage. It was the only race Pre ever had to quit without finishing. The cause of his injury was smoke from field burning.

Grass seed generated nearly \$500 million for Oregon's economy last year, according to the Seed Council. It is also responsible for the seasonal allergies many people in Eugene experience each spring in addition to smoky air each summer. The Oregon Department of Agriculture counted 1,182 complaints from residents of the Willamette Valley during the 2006 field burning season.

The Willamette Valley has more than 1,400 grass seed farms producing 60 percent of the world's cool-season grass seed, according to the Oregon Seed Council. Only 150 of those farms still practice field burning after a freeway accident caused by the smoke killed seven people and injured 38 others in 1988.

According to the American Lung Association, particulates made up of dust, ash or soot are small enough to "lodge deep in the lungs where they can do serious damage." The Lung Association gave Lane County an 'F' on a report card for the short-term particle air pollution caused by field burning as well as wood stoves.

According to Lisa Arkin of Oregon Toxics Alliance, particulates are only part of the problem. "Chemical fertilizers and herbicides go on those fields," she said. When the fields are burned, she said, "they haven't vanished."

"When you combust these chemicals," she said, "they can transform into more dan-

gerous chemicals like dioxins."

Pre himself testified against field burning before the state Senate in Salem, Moore wrote. Pre spoke only four months before he died in a car wreck in May 1975.

While Pre was running, the grass seed industry burnt almost 300,000 acres of land. Legislation passed in 1991 reduced that amount, and now only about 50,000 acres of the 500,000 used to grow grass seed are burned a year. But according to Tebbutt, "when that legislation was passed 15 years ago, information about the particles and the toxins in the smoke was not nearly as well documented as it is today."

The EQC will first consult with its own attorneys about whether it has the authority to call a halt to the burning.

"They clearly have the authority under statute," said Tebbutt. "What that [1991] legislation also did was give EQC authority to declare a public health danger and stop field burning."

The oft-divided commissioners were unanimous in their desire to protect the health of Lane County. Commissioner Bobby Green, who called for the hearing, "deserves a pat on the back," Arkin said.

Grass seed growers say burning gets rid of leftover straw and controls disease. However, Washington banned field burning in 1998 without adverse affects to its grass seed industry. A federal court ruled in May that field burning is illegal in Idaho under federal law.

Anti-field burning advocates hope the EQC stops the smoke before traditional start of the field-burning season — the Fourth of July.

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