

No Ban on the Burn

Field burning smoke will continue to blow into Eugene

Carla Hervert's voice was shaking as she stood up to testify for the people she says are "part of my family."

"I see first-hand how our patients suffer during field burning," she told Oregon's Environmental Quality Commission (EQC) at a hearing Aug. 9 in Portland.

Hervert, a Eugene-based registered nurse and exercise physiologist, was one of many Lane County residents there to try to persuade the EQC to place an emergency ban on field burning by grass seed farmers.

However, Barry Bushue, president of the Oregon Farm Bureau Federation argued, "This is a political issue, not a health one."

He accused Lane County of trying to "make an end run" around the state Legislature, where a bill to ban field burning didn't make it out of the agricultural committee in the House of Representatives last spring.

But after a smoky day in July, the Lane County Board of Commissioners wrote a letter demanding that the EQC place an emergency ban on field burning.

The EQC voted unanimously not to enact the ban, citing the complexity of the legal, financial and technical issues involved. The commissioners agreed that field burning did not constitute an "extreme danger" to public health.

As a result of the meeting, the EQC directed the Department of Environmental Quality to pursue \$90,000 in funding through the Legislature to get more information.

Eugene lung specialist Dr. Robert Carolan pointed out, "You're not going to improve on many multi-million dollar stud-

ies with a \$90,000 one."

"Five years ago," he said, "we didn't know fine particles caused vascular disease." Even short-term exposure could lead to strokes, he said.

The fine particles from field burning smoke, also called PM 2.5, are what's at issue for those who suffer from health problems. Thousands of the smallest of these particles can fit on the period at the end of this sentence; the largest are 1/30 the size of a human hair, according to the EPA. These particles can penetrate to the deepest parts of the lungs.

PM 2.5 is linked to "numerous health problems including asthma, bronchitis, acute and chronic respiratory symptoms such as shortness of breath and painful breathing, and premature deaths," says the EPA.

In addition to field burning, PM 2.5 is also generated by fuel combustion from automobiles, diesel-powered vehicles, power plants, wood burning and industrial processes.

Much of the debate at the hearing centered on the upcoming Olympic Trials to be held in Eugene in 2008. Dave Nelson, executive director of the Oregon Seed Council, made it clear that a separate ban on burning during the trials is not a problem — the farmers had already voted not to burn until two days after the trials end, he said. They stop burning regularly at the request of events like the Junction City Scandinavian Festival as well.

But a short-term cessation won't help sufferers like the grandchild of Caroline Higgins of Harrisburg. She and her husband



testified on behalf of their daughter and grandchild who left Oregon for the summer because their health is so compromised by field burning. She spoke of rushing her grandson to the hospital after a severe asthma attack brought on by field burning smoke. She spoke as well of a relative who cannot afford to leave Oregon during the burning season.

In response, one of the grass farmers in the audience muttered, "So give him some money."

Bushue was displeased at the short-term ban idea as well, but for different reasons. He commented on Eugene's preparations for the trials and the money the state legislation has allocated, stating, "I'm frankly incensed people are willing to trade off multigenerational farmers for a few million dollars, a new track and a fancy waterfront."

EQC commissioner Bill Blosser asked Lane County's representatives, "Why is this (field burning) just now an emergency?"

Hervert was emotional about that ques-

tion in an interview after the meeting. She said, "For people who can't breathe, it is an emergency. I don't know if you have ever not been able to breathe, but it is the scariest thing there is."

Field burning smoke leaves Hervert's patients in the cardiac and pulmonary rehab program struggling for air and even resorting to 24-hour oxygen, she said.

"I'm very disappointed," she said, in the decision to not ban the burning. "I had to come back to work, and it was very hard to face the patients. They get tired of fighting."

According to Charlie Tebbutt of the Western Environmental Law Center, the fight is not over yet. "There are numerous legal avenues that are available to municipalities ... to protect public health through stopping field burning, and we will continue to discuss these issues with Lane County and other local governments if they wish to pursue these options," he said.

Hervert was more succinct: "We're not giving up that easy."

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