

It Ain't Easy Being Wheezy

A strong grass seed industry keeps the allergy season going BY HENRY HOUSTON

The Willamette Valley is known is for its grass — and not just the kind you can smoke. It's an industry that brings in more than \$1 billion in economic activity to Oregon, according to the Oregon Seed Council, an advocate for the industry. The crop does support farmers' livelihoods but it also releases microscopic particles that can wreak havoc on the breathing of valley residents.

The Willamette Valley is one of the best areas in the world to grow grass seed, says Nicole Anderson, an agronomist and associate professor at Oregon State University. The geography of the Willamette Valley and its wet and mild winters and dry summers make it perfect for growing the crop.

We're the grass seed capital of the world. It makes sense when you consider that about 25 percent of the Willamette Valley is dedicated to grass seed farms, the Oregon Seed Council says. But this bragging right comes with a cost. The pollen from the profitable grass industry leaves many residents in need of medical support to make it through the allergy season.

Erin Reilly, a doctor with PeaceHealth, says the hospital's urgent care facilities see a lot of asthma-related cases from May to July — also known as the grass pollen season.

"During allergy season, we get a huge barrage of patients with allergy-related symptoms," she says. "We're probably seeing 20 to 30 patients a day."

High grass pollen counts have a history of impacting athletes at Hayward Field, too. Although it might be one of the more severe cases, Jim Ryun, who competed in the 1972 U.S. Olympic trials, had to be transported to Hayward Field by helicopter because of his severe allergies to the local grass seed pollen, according to runner and journalist Kenny Moore's book *Bowerman and the Men of Oregon*.

Grass pollen season — and allergy season in general — is tough for a lot of people. The body gets inflamed and swollen because we're swimming in pollen, Reilly says. Rubbing your eyes and nose comes with the territory of allergies, and it can lead to "picking up community-acquired infections," Reilly adds.

Living with high levels of grass pollen can cause some to have asthma attacks, even if there isn't a family history of the condition. I experienced one my first spring in Eugene. I had trouble breathing. A coughing fit would interrupt my sentences. After going to the emergency room I learned I had allergy-induced asthma. Once my lungs got back on track — and a few hours of sitting on a hospital bed — medical staff gave me a rescue inhaler, which works for about an hour or two. These inhalers are meant to work temporarily and only as a minimal tool, Reilly says. A steroid inhaler (which I use during allergy season so I don't suffer another asthma attack) can be prescribed, but the effects take a few weeks to kick in. That's why Reilly says those with allergy-induced asthma, for example, should start a plan far before the start of the allergy season.

With the Trump administration's readiness to stop upholding parts of the Affordable Care Act, which includes



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protecting people with pre-existing conditions, buying these inhalers without insurance would leave a patient with a large bill. Proventil, a brand of an albuterol inhaler, has an average retail price of \$96, according to GoodRx, an online database of pharmaceutical prices. Breo is a 30-day dose steroid inhaler that can be prescribed for those with allergy-induced asthma and can cost upwards of \$350 without insurance. The allergy season runs from Memorial Day to Fourth of July, so a patient would need 3 Breo 30-day dose steroid inhalers to get ready for and through the allergy season.

As climate change continues, the pollen season could get worse. A 2015 survey conducted by the American Academy of Allergy and Immunology, which Eugene-based Oregon Allergy Associates is a member of, found 63 percent of medical professionals have noted an increase in allergic symptoms. One testimony even says a patient used to have seasonal allergy symptoms but now has year round

symptoms due to a warmer climate and the extension of the grass season.

The grass seed industry, though, isn't going to change for allergy sufferers in the Willamette Valley. Anderson says the grass seed industry in Oregon attracts international farmers since we're one of the only regions that have such a wealth of knowledge about the crop. Groups come from New Zealand and South American countries to study the Willamette Valley's grass seed industry. Next year in May, it'll be a big field day when researchers from around the around come together for a grass seed conference, she adds.

"It's been a profitable enterprise for several decades and has a bright future," Anderson says. "We're producing a lot of the world's supply."

In the mean time, expect to keep swimming in the sea of pollen during allergy season — and beyond. ■