

GUEST VIEWPOINT

The déjà vu of opposing aerial herbicide spray

By LISA ARKIN

For The Register-Guard

Nancy Fadeley's Sept. 8 letter, "Field-burning tragedy led to a book," reminds us that once upon a time, Oregonians believed field burning was an essential and unstoppable agricultural practice.

Annually throughout the Willamette Valley, farmers torched hundreds of thousands of acres of grass seed fields, claiming economic necessity. During the era that we accepted that myth, we endured summers of smoke-laden air blackening the skies over Eugene, Springfield and surrounding communities. Deadly highway pileups, asthma attacks so severe people were rushed to local hospitals, and dangerous levels of air pollution that raised the risk of stroke and heart attack were the disastrous results.

For decades, the Legislature took no action because the Grass Seed Council, an industry lobby group, threatened that ending field burning would cripple the grass seed industry.

Yet against these odds, in 2009 Oregonians won a ban by proving that field burning affected people's health and safety of people in unacceptable ways. That successful legislative campaign, led by Rep. Paul Holvey, D-Eugene, was supported by the work of Beyond Toxics and the Western Environmental Law Center.

Oregon has not looked back since. No

one misses the coughing, headaches and asthma attacks caused by the smoky air that once permeated the mid- and southern Willamette Valley.

The drive to ban field burning is analogous to today's struggle to ban aerial herbicide spray and the demonstrable need to protect public health and safety. Used extensively in state and private timber management, herbicides mixed with oil and chemical "enhancers" are sprayed by helicopters near homes, schools and the springs and rivers that provide Oregon's drinking water.

People get sick and are put at risk against their will. Mayors in Depoe Bay and other coastal towns, with often futile hope, write letters to timber companies asking them to stop spraying herbicides mere feet from their cities' municipal water supply.

Just as they once deferred to grass seed lobbyists, today's legislators are afraid to question the claim that private timber owners will go bankrupt without aerial herbicide sprays.

This is déjà vu. We can challenge this myth with lessons learned from innovative farmers who found alternatives to field burning that boosted grass seed industry profits.

In 2009, the year the burn ban passed, Oregon's grass seed industry was worth \$300 million, and every summer farmers set fire to 250,000 acres of grass fields. In 2016, the Oregon Department

of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Agriculture report, a total of 12,449 acres were burned — a 95 percent reduction — but the industry is now worth \$436 million. That 45 percent increase in economic value represents a win-win for farmers and easier breathing for Oregonians.

Change often brings not bankruptcy, but innovation. Instead of torching 250,000 acres, today's grass seed farmers augment their incomes by baling the grass straw and selling it as animal feed. Grass farming is also rotated with other cash crops such as meadowfoam, winter wheat and clover to garner new and substantial economic benefits. Oregon State University researchers found that rotating crops and composting excess straw directly into the seed field improves soil health and deters unwanted weeds and disease.

If it were required to use alternatives to aerial herbicide sprays, the timber industry could likewise innovate to enhance profits. We know it's possible, because today some foresighted foresters produce diverse species of wood vital to rural mills and jobs, without any aerial herbicide applications!

Field burning, once touted as a conventional agricultural practice, proved unnecessary and deadly. Aerial herbicide sprays are likewise promoted as a conventional forest practice, resurrecting the identical mythic phrase that the

field burning industry used to normalize a practice dangerous to public health. That same fiction is used to cloak this incontrovertible truth: Aerial herbicide spraying poisons entire ecosystems and is just as devastating to public health as was breathing smoke from thousands of acres of burning fields.

Many of us will remember when Olympic runner Steve Prefontaine needed medical treatment after field burning smoke caused him to cough up blood from his seared lungs. Perhaps if he were still alive, he'd be fighting on behalf of rural Oregonians who've been rushed to emergency rooms while coughing up blood from breathing a chemical soup of herbicides.

Oregon will never go back to the days when we suffered from field burning smoke. It's now time to see poor logging practices and aerial pesticide sprays for what they truly are: unhealthy, unsafe and propped up by the same outdated claims once used to perpetuate field burning.

Whether by local initiative or by state legislation, we need to ban ultra-hazardous aerial herbicide sprays and turn our support to innovative, nonharmful forest practices built on ecological stewardship and respect for public health.

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