

Smoke Fills LCC During Slash Dinner

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Staff and faculty by Scott Robinson, LCC's public information officer.

"The college was not notified in advance," Aschim says in that email. The school had to cut off outside air access to its vents after the smoke had already gotten into the building due to that lack of notice.

A slash burn is a burning of leftover debris from logging. This particular burn came from private property above LCC owned by the McDougal brothers. Norm and Melvin McDougal had the area clearcut to make way for high-income housing. The McDougals have a long history of controversial clearcuts, mining and development in Oregon.

Slash burns like this one could become more common due to amendments to the Oregon Smoke Management Plan that will be voted on in early 2019.

"We contacted the Oregon Department of Forestry and asked for advance notice of any further burns, and they have done so," Aschim tells *Eugene Weekly*.

There have since been three more slash burns on that same property that the school was notified of — 20 tons of debris on Dec. 4, 45 tons on Dec. 5 and 16 tons on Dec. 11.

Chet Behling, unit forester of the Oregon Department of Forestry's Western Lane District, says there is no rule necessitating the advance warning of slash burnings for an area, but ODF will be warning the school of future burns, he adds.

"It's not required, but just because it's not required doesn't mean it's not a good thing to do," Behling says.

Although the land is private property, ODF oversees this particular burning since it's the result of a forestry operation, Behling says.

"We help with the smoke management portion of the operation, so we try to pick good days that have favorable weather as far as wind direction. So we give the thumbs up or the thumbs down, basically," he says.

He says that land near LCC is difficult geographically due to its close proximity to "smoke sensitive receptor areas" (SSRAs) — urban and residential areas that ODF tries to keep free of smoke.

LCC is essentially surrounded by SSRAs, Behling says.

"The only direction that is not an SSRA is to the southwest," he says, "and so in that area, we would be looking for a northeast wind to push it southwest. So that was actually a really good day [Nov. 29] compared to other days to burn."

Due to wind and other weather conditions, Behling says there's no way to restrict private landowners' burning to certain days when LCC might be less populated, such as on the weekend or over a school break.

Lisa Arkin, executive director of Beyond Toxics, worries about the smoke's effects.

“Open burning like that is a significant source of fine particulate matter,” Arkin says. “It’s so tiny that when you breathe it in, it passes right from your lungs into your vascular system into your arteries, heart and other organs.”

Arkin says exposure to fine particulate matter can result in asthma attacks and aggravated symptoms for those with emphysema or COPD. She says it can also increase chances for heart attack, stroke and cancer in the long-term.

Although she doesn’t agree with it, Arkin says one alternative would be to send the slash to a biomass plant — a power plant that produces electricity from burning slash and other biological waste. Seneca Sustainable Energy has a local one in Eugene.

“Beyond Toxics does not support large-scale biomass,” she says, “but it’s better than burning it right near a school.”

Arkin says the best thing that could have been done in this situation would be prior notification, so that “the school could’ve temporarily shut off the HVAC system,” she says, or so that “anyone with a condition might have known not to come in that day.”

There could be changes made to the Oregon Smoke Management Plan that could result in slash burns like this occurring more frequently, Arkin says.

“Recently the state Board of Forestry and the Environmental Quality Commission received testimony on Oregon’s Smoke

Management Plan," she says. Some of this testimony came from ODF, Arkin says. The agency wants to do more slash burning in order to prevent larger fires come wildfire season.

"What they want to do is exactly what happened at LCC," Arkin says. "More slash burning near urban or residential areas."

She adds: "Currently our law is very strict around when burning is allowed. They want to gut those rules to allow burning even on days when weather conditions would suggest it's not a good day for burning."

Arkin agrees that wildfires are a serious problem in Oregon and that prescribed burning can be used appropriately to prevent wildfires, but the lifting of health protections should be questioned.

The Environmental Quality Commission and the Oregon Board of Forestry will be voting to adopt those new rules sometime in January, Arkin says.

Beyond Toxics is hosting a Jan. 7 community forum on potential new laws to increase prescribed burning. It's 6-8 pm at the First Christian Church (1166 Oak St.) and is free to the public. Visit beyondtoxics.org for more information.