

Farmers: Fine fescues need fire

By Denise Ruttan

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Field-burning critics point to health concerns. And a tragic 1988 crash caused by poor visibility from a runaway field fire — that killed seven near Albany — still resonates for many.

But in uncertain times for commodities linked to the housing industry, growers of fine fescue grass seed in the dry hills above Stayton and Silverton say newly approved field-burning legislation could not have come at a worse time.

Senate Bill 528, which is headed for Gov. Ted Kulongoski's signature, phases out most field burning by 2010. This summer is the last summer for most burning, with burning limited to 20,000 acres. The bill allows limited burning to continue on as many as 15,000 acres of steep terrain in the hills above Stayton, Sublimity and Silverton for identified species, including fine fescues, said John Beyer, field-burning program manager at the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

But that exemption is little comfort for Stayton-area farmer Derek Schumacher. It still means fewer acres he can burn of a crop he says is best suited to that management method. Fields are burned generally in late summer, and increase yields by burning off straw residue. The practice also eliminates diseases and pests without chemicals, Schumacher said.

"This is definitely going to be catastrophic, especially for the economy in the Willamette Valley. It affects all farmers whether they burn or not," Schumacher said. "It's going to limit our crop rotations and limit what we can grow."

Grass seed is the state's second most important agricultural commodity, clocking in as a \$600 million per year industry, Beyer said.

On the steep terrain and dry, thin soil of the hills above Stayton where he lives and farms, Schumacher said fine fescue provides a niche in a market flooded by Christmas trees and perennial ryegrass.

Fine fescues, which are best for erosion control on steep hills, are grown on golf course fairways and roughs, and for shady areas on lawns, Schumacher said. The crop can remain in these soils for one or two decades, while other species have to be torn out every two to three years, Schumacher said.

"If you take field burning away, I don't know what's going to happen to these hills," Schumacher said.

At Taylor Farms, Zach Taylor and his father, Dennis Taylor, grow mostly fine fescues and some perennial rye grass and cereal crops at the Silverton hills farm.



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Stayton-area grass-seed grower Derek Schumacher says new restrictions on burning fine fescue in the Stayton and Silverton hills would be detrimental to the industry.

A closer look

For the full text of Senate Bill 528, "Relating to field burning and creating new provisions," go to <http://www.leg.state.or.us/09reg/measures/b0500.dir/sb0528.b.html>.

Zach Taylor said that without a hot burn, fine fescues do not yield enough seed on steep land that does not irrigate well.

"Fine fescue doesn't grow as well in the deeper soils on the valley floor. It grows much better on thin, clay soil," Taylor said. "For more than 30 years the industry has been researching alternatives to burning, working with Oregon State University, and there are none."

Taylor said though he cannot hypothesize what will happen in the future. But if it can't be burned, fine fescues will not be economically viable, he said.

"We can still burn almost all of our fine fescue acres. If we can't, I probably will quit farming," Taylor said.

But Taylor said growers feel squeezed by Salem and political forces unfamiliar with the natural-resource practices farmers have been developing for decades.

"Due to our economic times in general, it doesn't make sense to ding an industry when everyone's in tighter financial times," Taylor said.

Kevin Loe, part-owner of Triangle Farms in the Silverton Hills, grows fine fescue on about 35 percent of the farm's acreage. Loe does not trust the exemption for certain species grown in the Silverton hills. Currently, the bill does not call for further reduction after that.

"This is a Band-Aid on something that's going to get banned," Loe said.

For Loe, the limits come at a bad time. Contracts signed for grass seed purchases by landscapers, brokers and distributors are not being honored, he said. As a result, there is an oversupply sitting in the market.

"This is one more nail in the coffin," Loe said.

Dan Goffin, a retired grass-seed farmer whose Aumsville fields are now farmed by Doerfler Farms, is president of the Marion County Farm Bureau. In the 1970s he spent two and a half years studying erosion in the foothills here.

"Out of all the crops that could be grown in the hills, we found that fine fescue was the only crop that would meet federal erosion standards," Goffin said. "... Fine fescue has to be burned or you're not producing it."

Stayton grass-seed farmer John Beitel is the president of the Cascade Foothills Grass Seed Association, with members from Scio to Molalla. He has a small-acreage farm on which he grows mostly fine fescue. For the most part, "grass is my bread and butter," Beitel said.

Other crops are not as economically viable or as environmentally sustainable in the hills where the top soil can be as thin as six inches, he said.

"We have to keep our topsoil here or we're not going to be able to farm any more," Beitel said.

For up-and-coming growers like Schumacher, who has three young children to support, anything that negatively effects crop rotations is something to worry about.

"I feel like we're being legislated out of farming," Schumacher said.

druttan@salem.gannett.com