industry seeks alternatives to field burning

By Bob Spiwak

Olympia, Wash. — A Washington Department of Ecology ruling, which would eliminate burning of Kentucky bluegrass fields could have a severe impact on growers here. The ban, initiated last year, requires growers to reduce the number of acres burned by one-third each year, with a total ban by 1998.

Field burning has been the traditional way to eliminate post-harvest straw from the fields, at the same time killing pests and diseases. Some growers maintain that the fires also promote new growth and better yields. Some 60,000 acres in Washington are affected.

Ironically, no such action is contemplated by the state of Idaho, which shares the Rathdrum Prairie with its Washington neighbor. Thus, an imaginary state line separates a 10,000-acre plain, with burning allowed east of the line, but not west.

According to Linda Clovis, executive director of the Intermountain Grass Growers Association, the ban was instituted by then DOE Director Mary Riveland. Clovis maintains that when Washington Gov. Mike Lowry announced he would not seek re-election, Riveland arbitrarily imposed the ban, eliminating public notice and the normal public-hearing procedure. "She knew she'd be out of a job," said Clovis, "and rushed this [ban] through. In my opinion it circumvented due process."

However, according to a January article in the Moscow-Pullman Daily News, a study by several Washington State University professors concluded that benefits gained by reduced field burning outweighed the costs, and this prompted Riveland to mandate the ban.

The phase-out of burning is to allow the growers to devise alternatives. So far, said Skip Allert of Jacklin Seed in Post Falls, Idaho, there has been little success. "Last year," he explained, "they [growers] tried to bale the straw after combining, without much success."

Allert, Jacklin's grower service field representative, said alternative measures such as harvesting straw or plowing cost the growers more and do not kill weed seeds or diseases. Chemical treatments have been tried, but they, too, are coming under fire.

Washington State University and University of Idaho, along with Jacklin, are examining other means. One is close-clipping the grass, then vacuuming the residue. "We need more basic research," said Allert. "What genes we need to change, for instance."

But there is a costly time lag — a year before we get the crop out, another year to see the results."

Asked about the effect the ban will have on bluegrass prices, Allert said Washington bluegrass is not going to be the way it was. It can be grown in Idaho, but it is just a matter of time until there is a curtailment there as well, he said.

Clovis agreed and said that although no legislative action is pending, a group of environmentalists is looking into the ban's impact.

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