



# Focus

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## Grass Seed Field Burning Regulation Amendment

### Background

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Commercially valuable grasses are grown in various parts of eastern Washington for seed production. After harvest, grass fields have traditionally been burned as a crop management practice. This kind of outdoor burning produces large amounts of smoke. This smoke contains high levels of small particulate matter and gases that are harmful to human health. The burning season is short, generally lasting only three weeks to a month in late August and September, and, in most cases, efforts are made to direct smoke from field burning away from local population centers. Smoke management, however, does not reduce emissions. Instead it seeks to minimize impacts by burning during favorable meteorological conditions. Despite these efforts, the impacts of smoke from field burning have been a continual problem. An intense debate regarding the health impacts and economic benefits of field burning has been going on for several years.

### Recent developments

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For many years there has been no consensus regarding the health effects of field burning. Proponents have argued that field burning is a relatively minor source of particulate matter, and therefore is not the cause of significant health effects. Opponents of field burning argue just the opposite. They contend that even with the short burning season, the smoke from field burning is a very significant cause of respiratory problems, increased suffering by asthma and other respiratory disease patients, and even, in some cases, death. Until recently, the medical community has been silent on this issue.

The situation changed in March of this year. Based on a petition from more than 300 Spokane area doctors and recent research which shows that the fine particulate matter in field burning smoke can cause serious human health problems, the Department of Ecology (Ecology) announced goals for reducing grass field burning smoke. An emergency regulation reducing the acreage allowed to be burned by one-third in 1996 was established in late March 1996.

### The proposed amendment to the Agricultural Burning Regulation

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Since then, Ecology has developed a proposed amendment to the permanent regulation (WAC 173-430 - Agricultural Burning) with help from an advisory committee made up of growers, clean air activists, legislators, and local government officials. The proposal would reduce the number of grass field acres burned in Washington by an additional one-third in 1997 -- a 67 percent reduction over two years. The regulation also calls for Ecology to evaluate alternatives to open field burning. It includes several features to help growers meet the state's proposed clean air goals:

- On each farm, acreage reductions can be based either on May 1996 grass field acreage in production or on the number of acres permitted for burning in 1995.

- b Starting in 1997, up to five percent of a grower's grass seed crop may be exempted from the requirements under "unusual or extraordinary circumstances". For example, the grower may have part of a grass seed crop on terrain that is more difficult to clear than other parts of the field.
- b A burn permit trading program may be established. Under this program, growers may trade unused portions of burn permits if they do not burn their full allotted share.
- b Alternate open burning practices may be certified if emissions are substantially reduced as compared to standard open burning. Any certified alternate practice may be used to satisfy open burning reduction requirements.

This regulation does **not** reduce other types of agricultural burning. It is important to point out that the limitations being imposed treat grass seed field burning in a manner consistent with limitations previously imposed on other sources of air pollution.

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### **Regulation amendment process**

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Six public hearings are being held in eastern Washington to receive public comment on the proposed regulation amendment. All testimony received at the hearings, in writing, and recorded on the 1-800 line is part of the official hearing record for this proposal. Ecology is required to respond in writing to all testimony directly related to the proposal. This document is called a responsiveness summary and is prepared after the comment period ends.

The agency director will make a decision about adopting the proposal after review of: 1) public testimony, 2) the responsiveness summary, 3) staff recommendations, and 4) the environmental and economic impacts as contained in the cost/benefit analysis and the State Environmental Policy Act documents. Ecology anticipates a decision on the proposed regulation late in 1996.

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### **Alternatives to burning**

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The law states that Ecology will identify and certify practical alternatives to the open burning of grass fields grown for seed after reviewing all available information (RCW 70.94.656). Ecology will conduct public hearings at a later date prior to officially certifying practical alternatives that are reasonably available.

The process to certify alternatives was begun approximately one year ago. One major component of this process was the Symposium on Grass Seed Field Burning held in March of 1996, during which a principal topic of discussion was alternatives. The target is to have the use of alternatives in place for the 1998 season.

The process to certify alternatives to grass seed field burning is related to, but separate and unconnected to the regulation amendment process proposing a two-thirds reduction in burning.

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### **For More Information**

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