



The Oregonian

A real face behind the clouds of smoke

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The first thing you'll notice about Ike is how frail he is. Place a hand on his shoulder and bones will greet you. He moves slowly, mindfully, and with obvious effort. And these days he doesn't move far: He's tethered to a long plastic tube, one end of which curves around his ears and sits under his nose, the other end attached to an oxygen tank.

Sitting in a chair in his modest Sweet Home house, he looks out the window and sees a billowing gray-brown haze blotting out the sun. It is heading his way and his eyes grow frightened and his face resigned. The fields are burning again. He knows the smoke will make his breathing even more strained and the air itself dangerous. For him, surviving the night is not guaranteed.

The need for air is a primal reflex, fighting for breath a desperate cellular need. But age and infirmity leave him few options. Where can he go? Whom can he speak to? Who will actually care? In a society where money buys political favor and is equated with speech, who will speak for him?

He has no status, controls no political action committee, has no money to give weight to his cause. The governor won't take his call. His state representative won't rush to defend his interests. He has no lobbyists to write checks on his behalf. He has done what he can: dutifully made his protests to the air quality agencies year after year, but nothing changes. As far as he can tell, their job is to ensure that Eugene has good air. If results are a measure of intentions, they care nothing for him.

In the field burning debate, Ike is among the voiceless and forgotten. In all of the bloodless studies and statistics, the very real effects of dense smoke on failing lungs and fragile bodies are no more than abstractions, compiled by healthy people in clean rooms filled with breathable air.

Field burning should stop for many just and obvious reasons. But because such issues require a decades-long charade of alternately presenting and ignoring evidence, there is one reason that is overlooked -- a reason that requires no studies, no lobbyists, not even a single politician.

Field burning should stop not just because it's unhealthy, not because it's dangerous, not even because it's such a classic example of externalizing the cost of production. But because grass seed growers are part of a larger community and tens of thousands of their neighbors want them to stop.

That's it. It's as simple as that. In a civilized society, when your activities annoy, distress and harm your neighbors, you stop. Honorable people do not profit from the misery of others. The issue is not proving harm, but embracing accountability, understanding the impacts of outdated behaviors, apologizing to those who have been harmed, and finding alternative ways to dispose of agricultural waste.

The weather has been almost unbearably hot, and Ike's house is like an oven. But although the windows will be tightly shut tonight, the stench will seep into the small, close bedroom, and sleep will be impossible. Ike will gag, and he will cough, and his body will spasm, and he will cling to his oxygen tube waiting for morning, praying for the smoke to stop. He has no time for litigation, additional studies and long phaseouts.

He's waiting for a few honorable men.

Victor Rozek lives in Marcola.

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