

*Meteorologist Pete Parsons gears up for the 2007 field burning season and more*

## **Former TV forecaster eyes the weather for ODA**

**July 4, 2007...** A familiar face in the Portland television market has replaced another familiar face at the Oregon Department of Agriculture. TV meteorologist Pete Parsons has been hired to fill the vacancy left by fellow former on-air weather expert Jim Little, just in time to do some very important forecasting for this year's Willamette Valley field burning season. Weather information from ODA is critical for the valley's grass seed growers who depend on the ability to burn at least some of their fields.

"One of the things I like about this position is that I'm able to see the impact of what I do right away," says Parsons, who has learned the ropes from his predecessor prior to Little leaving for a position with the Oregon Department of Forestry. "The idea is to try and protect air quality while allowing the growers to do what they need to do."

Parsons will be dealing with a more specific customer. In television, his forecast was broad-scale and aimed at a multitude of interested viewers. This summer, he will be forecasting for people who depend on the weather information for their livelihood as well as the public that might be impacted from the activity of field burning. It's a balancing act. Parsons looks forward to the challenge.

"I'm very familiar with the weather patterns around here, I've been forecasting weather for more than 20 years in this region," says Parsons. "That part of the job won't be new. What is new and exciting to me is that I will be looking at the weather patterns in a slightly different way. I don't believe there will be more pressure for me to get it right. I always try to get it right whether I'm forecasting for one person or for a million people who might be affected by what we do."

Traditionally, the Fourth of July signals the beginning of the field burning season, which usually runs well into September. This year should be no exception as a limited number of fields will begin to be torched in the next couple of weeks, weather permitting. Parsons will be spending the early morning hours looking for the best possible conditions that will allow open field burning. Decisions to allow burning will be determined by a team of experienced members of ODA's Smoke Management Program. Weather will be just one factor in the decision.

"The growers have a job they need to get done and we are trying to keep the smoke away from populated areas," says Parsons. "It's a delicate balance that takes a team of people coming at it from different angles to reach the best decision."

Field burning has been scaled back significantly from the late 1980s but is still an important management tool for Oregon's \$481 million grass seed industry. The practice has helped growers eliminate straw residues and rid fields of weeds, insects, and diseases. But because of controversy

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generated by the smoke, the legislature directed a phase down on the amount of acreage allowed for open field burning with the final limitation set at 65,000 acres— a far cry from the days of a quarter-million acres going up in flames. A majority of growers have adapted to the limitation and have found new methods for dealing with the waste straw. On average, about 50,000 acres are burned annually.

The numbers of registered acres show how Willamette Valley grass seed growers have responded. A total of 83,136 acres have been registered for regular open field burning this year. ODA uses a formula for allocating how much can actually be burned. That formula gives all registrants 48 percent of what they asked for in order to stay under the regular limitation of 40,000 acres. There is an additional allowance of 25,000 acres for certain identified species of grass and for grass grown on terrain too steep for the equipment that needs to be used. As usual, growers are expected to burn considerably less than what they actually register.

It all adds up to the continued reliance on good weather forecasting.

"The basic idea is to get the smoke up into the atmosphere and then have it carried away from the populated areas while it disperses into the atmosphere," says Parsons. "We are looking for conditions that include little or no surface winds so that the smoke is able to rise up high into the atmosphere. We are also looking for winds in the upper atmosphere so that the smoke is transported away from the population centers and has the opportunity to disperse. If we get that combination of meteorological conditions, we can put smoke in the air and have minimal impact on people."

High temperatures, low humidity, low surface winds but good transport winds. That's a recipe for a good burning day in the Willamette Valley. Typically there will be at least a few days in the summer where it all comes together. Sometimes there is only a few hours in a given day where the conditions are just right. It will be up to ODA's Smoke Management Team and its newest member to make the right analysis and proper forecast.

Better tools, including computer models developed by Jim Little during his tenure at ODA, is making the job a little easier.

"There is now more information available, a quicker way to look at the data, and we have a better idea of what we are looking for," says Parsons.

Parsons was not hired to work only on field burning forecasts. His expertise in meteorology will come in handy when other ODA programs rely on weather forecasting. The Insect Pest Prevention and Management Program, for instance, needs to know if conditions are not favorable for spray projects on a given day. Long range forecasting for winter snowpack can help ODA plan for water quantity issues that might crop up later in the year. Having an experienced meteorologist on staff is important to an agency that deals with agriculture.

"This is a great opportunity for meaningful service," says Parsons. "I get to use my expertise to do a lot of good for a lot of people."

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