

All Crops, October 6, 2003

BURNING STUBBLE: CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES WISELY

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It's been said that truth is 90% perception and 10% fact. This is evidenced by many city people who feel that farmers destroy the environment. They think that farmers kill wildlife with toxic pesticides, destroy forests with plows and pollute rivers with fertilizer. My daughter recently came home from fourth-grade science asking if farming really did wear out the soil. We must do our best to fight this misconception and promote the fact that farming is environmentally friendly, and that farmers understand nature a lot better than your typical activist.

That being said, there are potent arguments regarding the burning of crop stubble by Delta farmers. Every fall, the "phone-in comment line" at the Sikeston newspaper is full of stubble-burning complaints.

We can argue that burning is a natural process, and that the smoke produced is natural and essentially harmless. When you disk stubble under, most of it breaks down to carbon dioxide-which is exactly what happens when it's burned. We can argue about economics: there are no businesses in Sikeston that would increase their production costs by \$2,500 just because someone else thinks they should. It's not fair that farmers have to grow their crops at 2003 prices and sell them at 1963 prices. Is it really better to burn OPEC oil and make more carbon dioxide to disk the stubble under?

But the arguments against burning are pretty strong. Very often, we get a nice fall cold front followed by crisp, clear, crystal blue morning skies. But by afternoon, the smoke makes Southeast Missouri look more like Los Angeles. Townfolks pay big bucks to buy organic matter to improve their soil structure, and we're destroying our free material.

No, they don't appreciate what it's like have a field full of wet gumbo, with a dense covering of rice straw that isn't going to dry up for another month. It isn't easy to roll rice straw and disk your corn stubble. No-till is an option, but isn't simple. And, even if you vow to never burn wheat stubble, you sure hope that no one tosses a cigarette out the window after your beans are up.

Farmers don't deserve their anti-environment reputation. Burning may not truly be bad, but there's two really big arguments I haven't touched on. First, just a few miles away from here, farmers in hilly areas burn nothing. They need their stubble to reduce erosion. If they don't have to burn why do we have to? Finally, don't forget that just a few years ago, there was a school bus accident adjacent to a burning field. The farming community doesn't need these kinds of incidents.

Farming has never been more difficult. Stubble can slow things down. But, please take a moment to consider what burning does to our already weak environmental reputation. Burning is a tough

argument to win, and there's lots to lose.