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Stormwater tax on ag only makes situation worse

This editorial appears in the March 22, 2010, Yakima Herald-Republic. It appears Puget Sound's headaches could become agriculture's burden to bear.

Legislators are now considering a nearly threefold increase to the tax on petroleum, pesticides and other chemicals in order to fund stormwater cleanup.

There's no question that dealing with polluted stormwater is a serious problem that requires expensive fixes. Petroleum products represent nearly 60 percent of the pollution that flows from streets and storm drains into Puget Sound waters.

But why saddle a dispro-portionate amount of the cost on the agriculture industry? How many impervious surfaces like asphalt do you see covering an apple orchard in Central Washington?

While fuel used on farms is not usually affected by a gas tax boost, the hazardous chemical tax envisioned under Senate Bill 6851 and House Bill 3181 hits at the wholesale level by affecting "dyed" diesel as well as other fuels. The tax also would contribute to the rising cost of fertilizer since petroleum is a key factor in its production.

In a letter to lawmakers opposing the tax, the Washington Farm Bureau cites what would happen to potato farmers. The crop value of potatoes is already being hammered by retaliatory tariffs from Mexico. If the hazardous chemical tax goes from 0.7 percent to 2 percent as proposed, the Farm Bureau predicts profits for potato farmers would plunge another 20 percent.

That translates into a huge economic impact. This state boasts 145,000 acres of potatoes, with four of the five top producing counties in the nation in 2005 coming from Central Washington (Benton County led the way).

Of course, the proposed tax increase would also spread its damage through the rest of the state's agriculture industry, which generates \$38 billion for Washington's economy along with 160,000 jobs. Why saddle this vital industry with burdensome costs at a time when the state's economy is just beginning to get moving forward again?

And we have no confidence that lawmakers would actually keep the added revenue in a designated fund where it's supposed to stay. During the past two years, legislators have raided the stormwater fund to the tune of \$260 million so they could plug holes in the state budget.

We hope legislators, especially those in the Puget Sound area, come to realize how detrimental this increased tax would be for the agriculture industry. Fixing stormwater pollution may be a critical issue, but so too is the economic viability of agriculture.

Tripling the hazardous chemical tax should go the way of rain water -- down the drain.

** Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Michael Shepard, Bob Crider, Spencer Hatton and Karen Troianello.*