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# Opinion

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## OUR VIEW

# Zinke, Perdue break with tradition — and listen

Farmers and ranchers throughout the West are accustomed to periodic visits from cabinet officials from Washington, D.C. These tours have been standard operating procedure for administrations of both parties since before the New Deal.

So it wasn't surprising when Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke visited Idaho together June 2.

Bigwigs from Washington always come to town for a reason, usually to deliver the administration's talking points as they relate to a particular audience.

And Perdue and Zinke followed tradition. They came to Boise State University to vow that their two departments



U.S. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, left, and Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue speak about farm and natural resource issues June 2 at Boise State University. Earlier that day, the secretaries met privately with Idaho farmers and ranchers — and listened.

will partner closely with states and communities on land management and other issues.

"We're here to make that commitment to you today,"

Perdue said. "We're (here) talking direct, eyeball-to-eyeball. We're going to make a (change) in the way we do business."

Of course they are. Everyone,

Democrats and Republicans, promises big changes, something new and better. For eight years Tom Vilsack, an affable Iowan who served as President Obama's ag secretary, brought the administration's message of hope and change as it applied to rural issues.

You don't fly 2,500 miles to tell a crowd that nothing is going to change.

No surprises here.

We'd be willing to write it off as business as usual, a harmless, fairly upbeat encounter that carried with it no real expectations. But, they also did something a little different, something they're still talking about in Idaho.

In a closed-door meeting with 10 producers before the Boise State event, Perdue and Zinke

didn't make speeches. They listened.

"They just didn't have an agenda. They truly wanted to listen to us," said Aberdeen potato farmer Ritchey Toevs. "It was a pro-producer meeting. It was a completely different experience than I've ever had."

It's not just the farmers and ranchers who are talking. Gov. Butch Otter, a seasoned political hand who has attended these kinds of events for years, was surprised.

"They sat there for a solid hour and listened to 10 different producers," Otter told the Capital Press. "In every case, both the secretaries ended up with one question — 'What can we do to help you?' That's refreshing."

Indeed. It will be even more refreshing if they deliver.

## OUR VIEW



# California goes buggy with newest tax

It's not a big deal — nothing involving insects generally is — but we couldn't help but comment on a new tax that our friends in California have cooked up.

The state Department of Fish and Wildlife plans to charge a fee to any researcher who collects bugs. As initially proposed in an 83-page document, the fee would have been \$421.58 per team of researchers that planned to collect any animal, no matter how rare. As is often the case with such fees, they would be accompanied by a requisite pile of paperwork. According to the paperwork justifying the change in paperwork, delays in reviewing applications — paperwork — were a problem.

Really.

Lynn Kimsey, director of the Bohart Museum of Entomology at the University of California-Davis, does a lot of research on insects. She sees the bug collection fee as an obstruction for researchers and scientists.

We see it as just another tax. After all, California taxes virtually everything else — why not bugs?

California taxes your income and your company's payroll. California also taxes everything you buy in the state — and anything you bought elsewhere but use in the state.

But that's just getting warmed up. According to the state Board of Equalization, it also has "special" taxes and fees on tires, alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, electronic waste, diesel fuel, telephones, electricity, fire prevention, hazardous waste, garbage dumps, jet fuel,

batteries, lumber, ballast water from ships, gasoline, natural gas, lead, oil spills, cell phones, insurers, storage tanks, utilities and water rights.

And don't leave out cities and counties, with their property and sales taxes, and other jurisdictions, including the Air Resources Board, which taxes the air — carbon dioxide.

It seems California's state song should be "Tax Man," that old Beatles tune. "If you drive a car, I'll tax the street, If you try to sit, I'll tax your seat. If you get too cold, I'll tax the heat. If you take a walk, I'll tax your feet."

What was missing? Bugs, of course. After all, this has the potential to bring in unlimited income for the state. There are an estimated 100,000 types of insects in California — about 6 percent haven't even been named — and a bajillion of each type.

Let's see, that's 100,000 times a bajillion — the state would be rolling in dough if it could just figure out a way to tax anyone who wants to collect them.

Ironically, because most insect research is conducted by state university scientists, the fee would boil down to the state taxing itself, an innovation most governments haven't figured out.

After researchers squawked about the tax — er, fee — they would have to pay to collect bugs, the folks at the Department of Fish and Wildlife relented. They plan only to tax researchers who collect bugs from an elite list of "special" bugs.

Which is good, because they wouldn't want to seem greedy.

## Biofuels work for Oregon

By JIM TALENT  
For the Capital Press

Guest  
comment  
Jim Talent



With all the hype surrounding the oil boom, it's tempting to pretend that America is on a glide path toward energy independence.

Unfortunately, even as fracking reached new heights, America's total domestic crude oil production declined in 2016. According to new data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration, that lost domestic energy production was quickly replaced by rising imports from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), with Iraq leading the pack as the fastest growing source of America's imported oil.

This boom-and-bust cycle has been playing out since the 1970s, when foreign oil ministers first attempted to hold America's economy hostage. Those of us old enough to remember can still picture lines of cars winding around the block from every filling station. Thankfully, the episode prompted a renewed focus on energy security that eventually gave rise to policies like the Renewable Fuels Standard (RFS).

I worked with then Sen. Tim Johnson of South Dakota to pass the RFS over 11 years ago. It was later extended by the Congress, and today, ethanol and other biofuels meet about 10 percent of our transportation fuel needs. America's dependence on oil imports has fallen by half since 2005, and the rising contributions of renewable energy sources continue to surpass expectations.

Some argue that renewable energy goals conflict with free markets, but that's never been true. Even at today's relatively low prices, petroleum-based fuels cost far more than homegrown ethanol, which sells for about \$1.60 per gallon.

But it could be even lower. Biofuel producers don't have the luxury of selling directly to customers in a competitive market. Biofuels are sold to oil refiners and importers before they can be added to the fuel mix found at local gas stations.

For years, these companies limited consumer options at the pump. The legacy of that monopoly is our continued vulnerability to price manip-

ulation by foreign energy producers within OPEC that have now joined forces with Russia to cut global energy supplies and increase prices for U.S. drivers.

To insulate consumers from this threat, the RFS requires oil refiners to make biofuel blends available to consumers, and demand continues to grow as retailers seek to market lower-cost, higher-octane options. With that growth has come lower prices and economic development in states like Oregon, where companies like Pacific Ethanol and SeQuential Biodiesel produce homegrown fuels.

As an agricultural leader, Oregon is already home to nearly 16,000 jobs supported by biofuel production. As an added benefit, the process leaves all the nutrients and protein intact, generating a surplus of low-cost animal feed that helps Oregon ranchers keep our grocery coolers stocked with top-quality meat.

Homegrown biofuels also dramatically reduce carbon emissions. The latest U.S. Department of Agriculture data show that conventional ethanol emits 43 percent fewer emissions than gasoline, and that number is on the rise thanks to innovations in sustainable agricultural.

Unfortunately, fossil fuel interests are as adept at maneuvering politicians as they are at manipulating prices, and the RFS remains an ongoing target for those who want to turn back the clock. Oregonians should remind their representatives in Congress that having renewable options at the pump is more than just a way to clear the air — it's a national security priority.

*Former U.S. Sen. Jim Talent currently serves as chairman of Americans for Energy Security and Innovation, which supports homegrown, renewable energy to reduce our dependence on foreign oil. He represented the state of Missouri in Congress from 1993 to 2007 and served on the Senate Armed Services, Energy and Natural Resources and Agriculture committees.*

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