

Smokey Bear needs to rewrite his slogan

Finally recognizing a need that has been blatantly obvious for years, the U.S. Forest Service is now attempting to alter its fire-fighting and logging practices to help prevent major wildfires from occurring.

At a congressional hearing on Tuesday, Assistant Agriculture Secretary James Lyons said that the Forest Service would be shifting more emphasis to "salvage logging," the removal of dead timber, in order to reduce the amount of fuel available for a forest fire.

The Forest Service is also planning to thin out some dense stands of forest, which are more susceptible to fires, and even light some small fires deliberately in an effort to further reduce the amount of combustible material lying on forest floors.

The new policies are a dramatic departure from the "extinguish all fires" mentality that has characterized the Forest Service's fire prevention strategy for decades.

That attitude has left forests full of dead trees and other combustible material, which has led to forest fires much larger, hotter and uncontrollable than would otherwise naturally occur.

Every summer, states throughout the West are ravaged by blazes that wipe out half a forest. This summer, 14 firefighters (many of who were from Oregon) were killed while fighting a fire in Colorado.

The costs of continuing the old policy are high. The solutions being adopted by the Forest Service carry a high price tag as well, (the Congressional Research Service estimates the cost at \$250 an acre for about 14 million acres in the West) but at least they would be grounded in good science.

That good science requires a more moderate set of policies than have existed in the past.

The new policy should not, and realistically could not, remove all dead materials from the forest. Fallen trees and other dead material have been shown to be a valuable part of the forest ecosystem, providing food and shelter to some forms of life that otherwise could not survive.

And the policy should not, and assuredly would not, let all fires burn uncontrolled, either. Some fires must be fought, to save lives and property. Although a forest fire allowed to burn or intentionally set may appear to be destroying property, it will benefit both forests and forest industries in the long run, by helping to eliminate more massive fires.

Besides, some studies have shown that a tree can survive a forest fire, if there isn't too much dead fuel around for the fire to consume. If the forest has been regularly cleared of combustible waste by periodic burning, as occurs in nature thanks to lightning storms, fires may burn out or move on before destroying the entire forest.

Perhaps Smokey Bear should change his slogan. "Only you can prevent forest fires. Only we can start them on purpose."



OPINION

News I didn't want to hear



DAVID THORN

Early Monday morning, an 18-year-old high school senior was shot in the head while he was sleeping at his home in west Eugene.

Police said that the student, Aaron Iturra, was a "documented gang affiliate" with a criminal record. It is not yet known who is responsible for the killing. If the murderer(s) are members of a gang, it would be the first fatal incident of gang violence in the city's history.

This was news I didn't want to hear. Not in my hometown.

You see, I grew up in Eugene. I graduated from Willamette High School, the same school Iturra was attending when he was killed.

When I was a junior, I wrote an editorial for *The Wolverine*, Willamette's newspaper. In it, I warned the city not to believe it was "too small or too white" to have a problem with gang violence.

That was in 1991, when the first obvious signs of gang activity started showing up as modern hieroglyphics, spray-painted on freeway overpasses and railroad boxcars.

But even as I was admonishing the city to keep its guard up against the arrival of gangs, I never really believed it would happen. There was always something inside me that kept humming some *Pollyanna* mantra: "C'mon," it said. "This is Eugene."

That mantra was silenced Monday afternoon, as I heard of Iturra's murder.

To the credit of the police, they have been warning us about gangs for years. It was a police presentation that prompted me to write that editorial, which I now realize, I didn't really believe in.

But few people seemed to be

listening. Over time, schools drafted gang policies and started working closely with the police, but the community at large seemed to pay little attention.

The year after I left Willamette, a student was busted for having a gun in his locker. Although that incident had nothing to do with a gang, it should have been a hint that the potential for serious youth violence was growing.

And when a student was shot and wounded at Sweet Home High School earlier this fall, and another was injured in a stabbing at Thurston High School a week later, I should have been prepared for someone to get killed.

But I wasn't. When I went to Willamette, things were different. When someone had a problem with someone else, that person would just pick a fight in the locker bay. A teacher usually intervened before anyone's nose got bloodied — not always, but usually. It wasn't exactly civil, but it did get the point across.

While that kind of confrontation may still take place, there is now a whole new level. And it's a disturbing portent of things to come. Or rather, things that are already here.

Monday's killing was a savage act of violence. And while it might not be gang-related at all, I have a sick feeling that it was.

Portland has 400 drive-by shootings a year, and that city's first gang fatality came only five years ago. Will we be in that same position five years from today?

It goes without saying that I hope it doesn't come to that. I just wish I knew what can be done to prevent it.

The police have some ideas about that, of course. And I'm sure there are high school administrators and teachers who have suggestions, as well.

The Eugene School District has implemented a dress code that prohibits gang clothing. Suggestions to that effect have been made at Willamette and other area high schools, I'm sure.

But I don't think a dress code will make any difference at all.

For one thing, I don't know what constitutes gang apparel, and I don't think there's a hard and fast definition. Do we outlaw

the color blue? Red? Get real. Besides, a gang's worst behavior is likely to be outside of school, anyway.

What about installing metal detectors or hiring more security guards? That may curb violence at the schools themselves, but it will do nothing to stop crimes that happen off school grounds.

A metal detector wouldn't have kept Iturra's killer from creeping into the converted garage he used as a bedroom.

Some people have described the killing as a "wake-up call." It certainly was for me. But there's an ironic twist to that — a twist with tragic implications.

If Iturra's murder just creates an atmosphere of fear, it could result in even more violence. When someone is killed, the natural reaction is to prepare to defend yourself. Too often that means arming yourself, or allying yourself with someone who is armed. That's practically the definition of a gang.

That must not be allowed to happen here. We need to find a middle ground between denial and counter-productive fear. There needs to be a community-wide commitment to preventing gangs and youth violence.

There must be adequate funding for the police department to effectively investigate — and when appropriate, punish — youth crime.

And because boredom is a contributing factor to gang formation, there must be enough money for schools to keep the curriculum interesting and the extra-curricular activities up and running.

Places like Looking Glass and the Youth Connection Teen Center must continue to provide services for young people, and get the money necessary to do so.

People must be on the lookout for crime, and not ignore it because it isn't happening to them. Because someday, it just might.

All this and more will be needed if we are to keep youth violence from escalating here, as it has in so many other places.

Not in my hometown. C'mon. This is Eugene.

David Thorn is managing editor for the Emerald.

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