

**GUEST EDITORIAL
BAKER CITY HERALD**

Reducing wildfire risk

The best time to reduce the risk of a big wildfire in Baker City's watershed was probably several decades ago.

Which is not to say it's too late.

Despite the Forest Service's hands-off approach to the 10,000 acres in the Elkhorn Mountains through which the city's drinking water flows — not that a heavy-handed approach would be an improvement, to be sure — the watershed has avoided the fiery disaster that could leave the city without a safe water supply.

And a bill likely to exceed \$15 million or \$20 million to fix the problem.

Managing the watershed is a challenge.

It is not a place where conventional commercial forestry, designed to maximize the production of board-feet of timber, makes sense. One reason the streams and springs continue to produce clear water is that the forests remain intact, able to absorb torrential rains and the spring runoff without turning into muddy torrents unfit for drinking or much else.

But those forests, as forests inevitably will, have aged and, in places, deteriorated, the victims of insects and disease and drought. A study in the 1990s by fire experts found that the area probably is overdue, statistically, for a big blaze.

We can't eliminate that risk, of course.

But we can reduce it with well-conceived, and carefully executed, thinning of some of the densest, least healthy and most fire-prone parts of the watershed.

And in one sense this might be the ideal time to pursue that strategy.

Congress this spring at long last ended the practice known as "fire borrowing." That refers to the Forest Service and other federal agencies diverting money earmarked for other work — including the sorts of thinning projects envisioned for the watershed — to pay the billion-dollar annual tabs to fight wildfires.

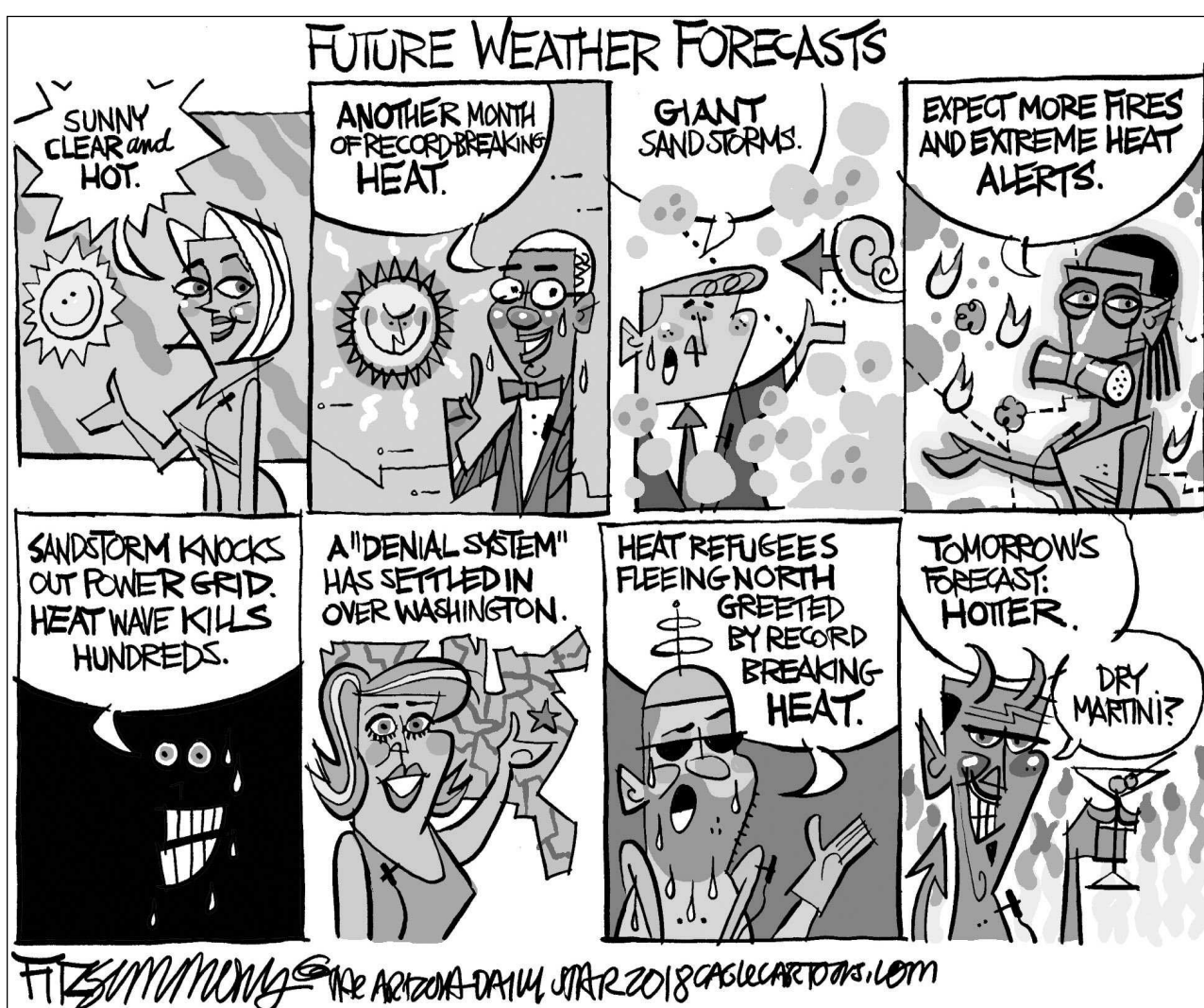
To put it another way, agencies have struggled to deal with the problems that contribute to massive blazes because they were trying to put out... massive blazes.

The bill that passed this year won't immediately fix the problem. But by 2020 the federal government will set aside \$2 billion annually, as an emergency fund, to fight the bigger fires. In theory that should make more money available for thinning projects.

Nor is that the only way Congress can help in this endeavor.

Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden and Rep. Greg Walden last week sent a letter to the Forest Service's regional office in Portland advocating for Baker City's watershed to be a priority for some of those dollars.

The threat facing the watershed is hardly of recent origin. In 1993 the Forest Service and city sponsored a tour of the watershed during which officials cited the same concerns that their successors talk about today.



Your views

Cassens: Stand up for the Land and Water Conservation Fund

To the Editor:
I serve on the board of the Oregon chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers from my home in northeast Oregon. BHA is a national nonprofit organization, formed in 2004 around a campfire right here in Oregon, that serves as the voice for our fish and wildlife and public lands and waters.

Advocating for conservation and public access is a deep-rooted part of who I am and how I was raised and how I am raising my kids. After becoming a mother, I realized the importance of protecting wild spaces for future generations. I was lucky enough to be invited to join BHA's largest ever grassroots trip to Washington, D.C., to advocate for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

The LWCF is America's premier bipartisan conservation and access program, reinvesting federal offshore energy revenues into public lands and waters to ensure that we all have access to the outdoors. Congress created the LWCF more than a half-century ago to preserve America's outdoor recreation heritage. Whether through providing funds for a local park or conserving our wild backcountry, the LWCF guarantees that America's \$887 billion outdoor economy continues to sustain communities nationwide. However, without action by Congress, the LWCF will expire on Sept. 30.

While in D.C., I met with representatives from the offices of Sen. Ron Wyden and Rep. Greg Walden and discussed the importance of permanently reauthorizing and dedicating funding for the LWCF. I also had the pleasure of meeting with Sen. Jeff Merkley and

his staff. We discussed the successes and impacts of LWCF projects statewide and agreed that failure to reauthorize the LWCF would harm the public access and opportunities that so many of us value here in northeastern Oregon.

I cannot thank Oregon's legislative representatives and staff enough for taking time to meet with me. Please stand with me in asking our representatives in Congress to permanently reauthorize the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Our wildlife habitat, sustainable wild fisheries, and hunting and fishing access rights depend upon it.

Chelsea Cassens
Imbler

Alexis: Small town pride on the Fourth of July

To the Editor:
Butch Boettcher, Fred and Hazel Alexis partici-

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Email your letters to news@lagrandeobserver.com or mail them to La Grande Observer, 1406 5th St., La Grande, Ore., 97850.

pated in the Haines annual patriotic celebration of July 4th.

Eastern Oregon should be PROUD of Haines' annual "Small Town" (Big Heart) atmosphere!

Fred Alexis
La Grande

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