GUEST EDITORIAL FROM THE EAST OREGONIAN

Forest fire management is vital

Americans have looked down our noses at China's dirty air we've seen on television — dreary gray and brown, shrouding ugly streets in a kind of sickly twilight. How disheartening it is to find ourselves dealing with such ugly air here in the Pacific Northwest this August.

As the National Weather Service maps have clearly shown, Northeast Oregon is at the edge of the dustpan, where smoke from fires in British Columbia and elsewhere in the Northwest collects and sticks.

As a result of fires, air-quality monitoring systems have classified conditions as unhealthy across many thousands of square miles of the Pacific Northwest. This comes with warnings about limiting the amount of time spent outdoors and curbing physical activities that might cause us to breathe in more smoke. It's a little like being stuck in a smoky tavern with no exit — although diluted forest fire chemicals aren't as injurious as tobacco smoke, thankfully.

Aside from being grateful for clean-air rules that began curbing industrial air pollution in the 1970s, what should be our response to forest fires and the smoke they cause?

If the past several years are anything to go by, developing better strategies will become vital as our continent's climate changes. Although it's safe to say that almost everyone is against smoke, dealing with underlying issues will be extremely tricky.

It rushes us headlong into controversies over forest thinning, timber harvests, under-story maintenance, controlled burns and how (or even whether) to regulate residential building within the Pacific Northwest's forest interface. All these subjects have evoked expensive lawsuits and destructive political battles. To say there is little trust would be an understatement. Circumstances may force the combatants to overcome these differences, or at least spur less-polarized middle-of-the-road citizens to begin mandating smarter decisions.

When it comes to avoiding dangerously destructive forest fires and the harms they create, what might smarter management look like?

Many solutions are likely to entail seeking and following the advice of professional forest managers, rather than either acquiescing to decisions forced by environmental lawsuits on the one hand, or back-room industry manipulations on the other. Forest policies should be made on a time scale of multiple decades or centuries, and not change with presidential administrations.

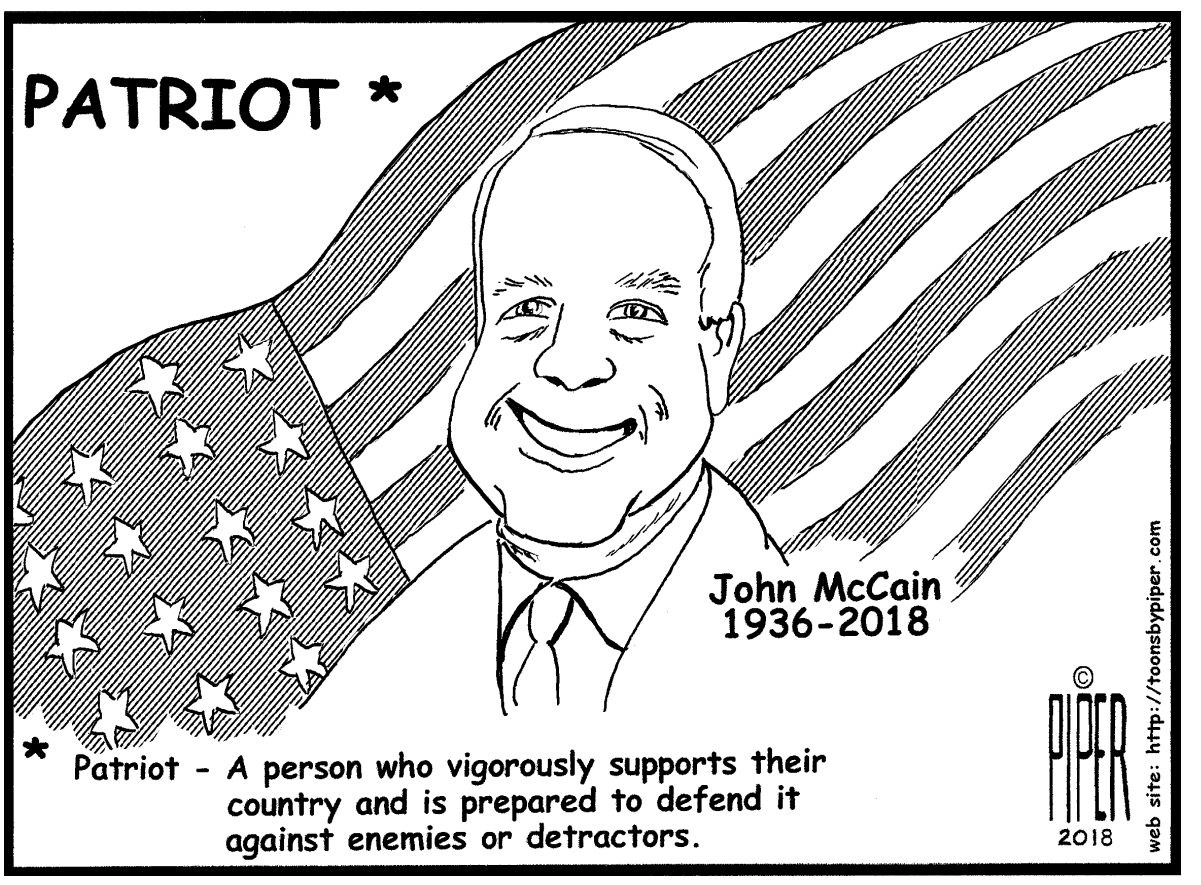
Neither the environment nor industry are well-served by a tangled-up political mess in which strategic decisions are so hard to make and stick with.

While there was disagreement within the agency, National Forest Service policies notoriously favored harvest over all other options during much of the 20th century.

The same was true of state forestry agencies in the Pacific Northwest. Only with generational change in personnel was there a gradual shift to more balance between harvest, thinning, conservation and other options. Moving forward in the 21st century, we should insist on carefully designed consensus-based management groups, with mechanisms to protect against political and judicial manipulation.

The answers won't be easy to find or accept. Addition al harvest is likely in many cases to be the most affordable way to control fire risk, while providing a useful economic boost to rural areas. Thinning will be more environmentally palatable in other places, but tends to be expensive. Prescribed burns — never popular — will sometimes be the right way to go.

We in the Northwest don't want to have to get used to having dangerous air. Nobody should have to become good at wearing filtration masks, or interpreting air-quality warnings. We must get ahead of the fires before they get ahead of us.



Now, more than ever, we need our union

For the past six months I have been honored to serve as executive director of SEIU Local 503, Oregon's public employee and care provider union. On this Labor Day weekend, I'm reflecting on our incredible history, but I'm also worried about the future.

The story of SEIU in Oregon is one of growth and gains for hundreds of thousands of families. Our union has raised the minimum wage, secured funding for important public services and passed progressive laws like paid sick leave, Medicaid expansion and health care for all kids.

We have fought hard to defend public employee pensions, which today generate $3.9 billion in total economic value to Oregon and provide a secure retirement for 250,000 people. Our members also fight to improve public services. We've fought for and won funding for Oregon's foster care program, senior services and the Oregon Health Plan.

We have also transformed in-home caregiving. When home-care workers first organized as part of our union in 2001, they were exempt from the minimum wage and often earned less than $4 per hour. Today, home-care workers earn at least $14.65 per hour and have a health care plan. That has reduced turnover and improved the standard of care seniors and people with disabilities receive — all thanks to a union contract.

But today unions are under attack. Right-wing groups like the Freedom Foundation/Opt Out Today are doing everything in their power to make it harder for working people to organize a union. With millions of dollars from wealthy special interest groups like the Koch brothers, they are trying to stop minimum wage increases, slip loopholes into our tax code and slash workers' benefits in an effort to rig the economy in their favor. And it's working. Our economy keeps growing, but the gains are not trickling down.

Strong unions are the best tool we have to push back on this. Research — and our experience in Oregon — shows that strong unions raise wages for members and non-members alike. Unions also help lift up the wages of women and people of color because everyone is treated fairly under a union contract.

For some of us, the impact is more personal. With a union contract you don't have to be afraid to ask for time off to care for your family, or to stand up to a boss who sexually harrasses his employees, because you know you won't be fired without cause. When you have a contract and people at your side, you have the freedom to achieve your potential without being held back by fear.

That's why I'm so concerned about the attacks on labor unions. Without a counterpoint to big corporations and the rich, how will regular people like you and me advocate for ourselves?

Today, on Labor Day, I resolve to stick with my union. No matter what the Koch brothers throw at us, my brothers and sisters at SEIU will keep fighting to make sure all working people in Oregon have a fair shot at success.

My Voice
ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Melissa Unger is the executive director of SEIU Local 503, a union representing 72,000 public services workers and care providers in Oregon.

My Voice columns reflect the views of the author only. My Voice columns should be 500-700 words. Submissions should include a portrait-type photograph of the author. Authors also should include their full name, age, occupation and relevant organizational memberships. We edit submissions for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We reject those published elsewhere. Send columns to La Grande Observer, 1406 5th St., La Grande, Ore., 97850, fax them to 541-963-7804 or email them to news@lagrandeobserver.com.

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