

GUEST EDITORIAL FROM THE ALBANY DEMOCRAT-HERALD

Fight fires now, but prepare for new normal

You can summarize all the predictions for how future wildfire seasons will play out in Oregon and throughout the West with just a few words: Bigger. Hotter. Longer.

Despite a strong year for snowpack, there's no reason to think that this year's fire season will be an exception. The state has seen 1,000 acres burn already this year.

And there's no reason to doubt that the fire season next year will be any different; in fact, a warmer and drier than usual winter could add up to big trouble for Oregon and the West. It's all part of what experts are calling the new normal for wildfires.

That's why we need to think differently about how we react and respond to wildfire, and we need to think in two different tracks: First, we need to be sure that we have adequate resources on hand to fight the ones we know will erupt this season. We may be a little better prepared on this front this year, but every new batch of fires puts additional pressure on a system that already can be stretched pretty thin.

But, second, we need to prepare over the long haul for that new normal — and that includes efforts to increase the amount of thinning that takes place in forests that are choked with the undergrowth that fuels increasingly intense fires. It also includes work underway to increase the use of prescriptive burns to make those forests more resilient.

And it also includes work to build communities that are increasingly fire-resilient. Across the West, where we still like to build homes in the middle of vulnerable areas, this work likely will be challenging.

So we read with interest the story about efforts by a group of Oregon legislators to be sure that the state is ready to respond to wildfire this summer — but also to start thinking about fire differently over the long run.

Not surprisingly, many of the legislators involved in the current effort hail from Southern Oregon, which has been hit hard in recent years by wildfire. These fires have had a dramatic effect on the area's economy, with tourism taking a huge hit and institutions such as the Oregon Shakespeare Festival suffering millions of dollars of losses from canceled shows.

One of the legislators, Rep. Pam Marsh, an Ashland Democrat, is working to line up an additional \$6.8 million in funding for wildfire mitigation and suppression. That seems like it might be a wise short-term investment, especially considering that the state spent some \$514 million last year fighting fires.

And it seems like a better bet than Gov. Kate Brown's budget recommendation: The governor has called for no additional funding to fight this year's fires.

To be fair, Brown wants to invest money in longer-term efforts: She has created a wildfire council and will ask it to come up with policy recommendations, which presumably would need to be funded by a future legislative session. The council could turn out to be a vital resource in steeling Oregonians against future wildfire seasons, but we won't know for sure until we see its work.

In the meantime, you can see why legislators from Southern Oregon are nervous about the governor's flat firefighting budget.

So the state needs to do both: prepare for what this season brings and, at the same time, work with an eye toward future seasons. After all, when a wildfire is burning on the outskirts of your town, that's a crisis that needs to be immediately addressed. But let's also start taking the long-term steps that could prevent other towns from being threatened next year.



There's still time to stop B2H

I woke up this morning wondering how an Oregon state agency could have approved a plan to convert vacant commercial buildings in La Grande to stables. One hundred and eighty horses, plus mules and heavy wooden wagons for hauling freight? Think of the congestion, to say nothing of the mess of manure and smell and flies. Granted, if a massive earthquake occurred and I-84 buckled and was unusable, we'd need alternate transportation, but surely there are other ways to plan for an uncertain future? Do we have to go back to the 19th century? Why horses? What about trains, planes? ATVs? Even drones?

Jayson Jacoby's recent article about a state agency supporting the ever-controversial B2H (Boardman to Hemingway) transmission line must have short-circuited my imagination. Fortunately, we're not in imminent danger of horses and mules in downtown La Grande, but we are approaching another

bureaucratic slog on the slow march toward Idaho Power's horse and buggy efforts to build a massive 550 kV transmission line across Northeast Oregon, just like the ones they've been building for more than a hundred years. Recent technological advances in energy production, storage and delivery have produced dramatic changes in electric utility industries, but Idaho Power has consistently ignored them. They've downplayed storage for renewables, discouraged solar net metering and avoided micro-grids.

Mr. Jacoby quotes Mitch Colburn and Jeff Maffucio, two Idaho Power staff challenged with seeing that the B2H is built, whether it's needed or not. That's important, because Idaho Power's shareholders are enthusiastic about their share of \$80 million guaranteed profit on the B2H. Apparently Jacoby did not contact the Bonneville Power Association, one of Idaho Power's two partners in

My Voice

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lois Barry is a resident of La Grande. My Voice columns reflect the views of the author only. My Voice columns should be 500-700 words. 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.

this controversial project. BPA recently decided to drop out of the B2H; they have other more pressing uses for their funds. That's not surprising. Over the past five years, two-thirds of the utilities planning major transmission lines, including two in Oregon, have changed their plans, even though the lines were deemed "essential" right up to the day they were canceled.

The Oregon Energy Facility Council Siting Council (EFSC) will meet in La Grande soon. Their mission is to approve the route chosen by Idaho Power, which

would ring the valley with 171 monster towers, 180 feet high, most on private property. Property values would plummet, wildlife habit would be compromised, timber lands damaged and the iconic Oregon Trail changed forever. We need to convince the Siting Council that the B2H would be a poorly planned \$1.2 billion burden on rate payers.

Attend the EFSC hearing: June 20, Blue Mountain Conference Center, 4:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. Contact StopB2H.com for information on preparing comments for the hearing.

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