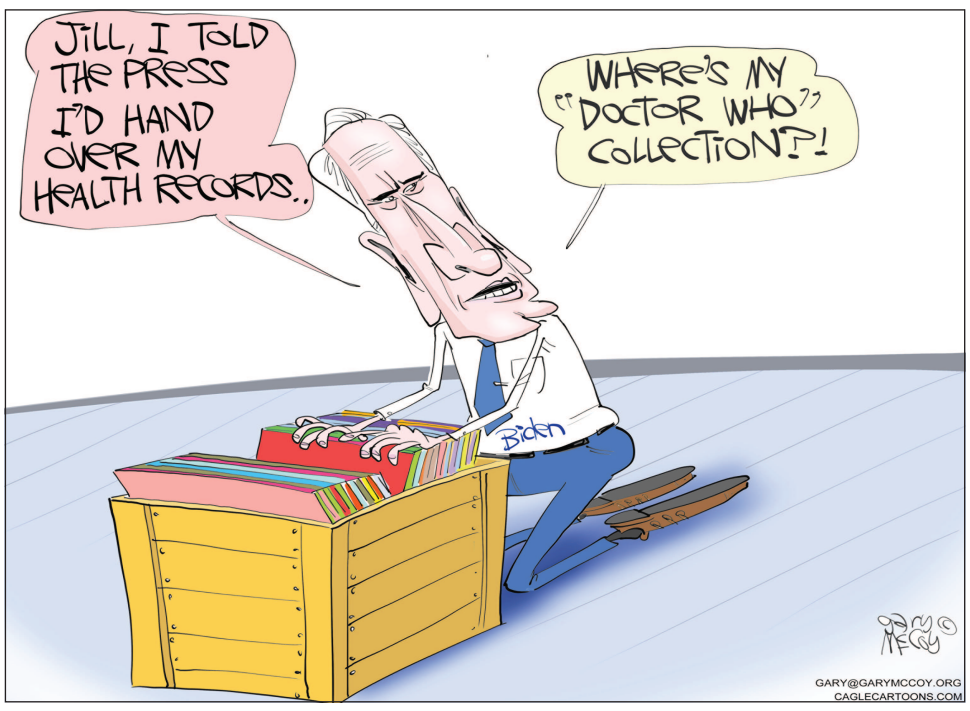


## On the Fence

# What should be done about plastic pollution?

## 'In many ways recycling only kicks the can down the road'

**JOEL RICE**
UNION COUNTY PROGRESSIVES/DEMOCRATS

Plastic is a material composed of synthetic or semi-synthetic organic compounds that are malleable and can be molded into solid objects. Production of plastics has exploded over the past 100 years since the development of the first plastic — Bakelite — and production has steadily increased. In 2015, production of plastics was 381 million metric tons, or about 150 pounds for every man, woman and child on the planet. To date we have produced more than 8 billion metric tons of plastic worldwide amounting to more than one metric ton of plastic per person. Concerns regarding plastic waste have accelerated as the extremely slow rate of decomposition of plastics has been recognized and large masses of plastic garbage has begun to appear on the ocean surface.

Plastic is not a natural product and does not degrade naturally. Plastic usually takes 400 years or more to degrade, with most of the plastic ending up as extremely small particles of plastic, invisible to the naked eye, rather than fully decomposing. Fishing line can take 600 years, disposable diapers 450 years and plastic bags either a 1,000 years if buried or four years if exposed to light.

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is the largest of the five offshore plastic accumulation zones in the world's oceans. It is located halfway between Hawaii and California. I encourage everyone, if they have not already, to look at images of this patch easily accessible on the internet (www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHK2Zg5OibI). It is a floating garbage dump twice the size of Texas. Garbage from the 1960s and '70s is still floating there. Sea turtles in the area of the GPGP have up to 74% of their diet composed of ocean plastics. Albatross chicks in the area have 45% of their wet mass composed of plastics. It is inevitable that within a few years the weight of ocean garbage worldwide will outweigh the total weight of all the fish (including whales) in the oceans. Although only 10% of the world's plastic makes it to the ocean it gives us a visual clue to what is happening on land as well, just better hidden.

Microplastic particles, most of which are too small to be seen with the human eye, are now everywhere and are a hot area of research in regard to human health. Recent studies suggest that people consume 39,000-52,000 microplastic particles per year, or the equivalent of a credit card every week, mostly from water and food but also as dust particles in the air. Unseen artificial plastic is everywhere in the natural world. The health effects are not yet understood.

The realistic options for addressing this issue are recycling, incineration, landfills and alternative biodegradable materials. In many ways recycling only kicks the can down the road. Most recyclable plastics are only suitable for recycling once so recycling typically delays rather than prevents plastic disposal to landfill or incineration. Landfills are expensive when managed appropriately and eventually result in greenhouse gases and leach polluted water. It is hard to return such land to productive use. Incineration can result in greenhouse gases and significant air pollution — but well engineered, technologically sophisticated incinerators much less so. Techniques such as gasification (turning plastic into natural gas) and phyrolysis (turning plastic into diesel) are being actively studied but have large technological barriers.

What about biodegradable materials like paper, cardboard or cotton? Given that almost half of all plastic waste is generated from packaging bodes well for substitute materials. Random possibilities include shipping in cardboard boxes instead of plastic, bottled water in glass or aluminum containers that are indefinitely recyclable, and cornstarch shipping peanuts. Forestry suppliers ship all items with cornstarch peanuts that I put in the compost bin. They disappear as sugar with the first rain.

My hopes for the future are (1) substitution of biodegradable or infinitely recyclable materials for plastic wherever possible, (2) public will to fund private-sector high-tech incineration facilities, and (3) waste management infrastructure structured with financial incentives to create highly efficient alternatives to landfills with all compostable materials composted and returned to the soil. As usual we must incentivize doing the right thing.

*Editor's note: The Union County Republicans did not submit a piece for this topic.*

# Your views

### Olmstead: Murder, plain and simple

To the Editor:

Is there anything more precious or helpless than a tiny baby? Apparently not to 44 Democrat politicians who voted to legalize aborting an infant at any time during the pregnancy.

Harvesting baby organs has become a very lucrative business. The closer to full term, the healthier the unborn infant's organs are. In May of 2013, Dr. Kermit Gosnell was convicted of murder for doing this. At this time, only four states had laws protecting babies: no abortions after a heartbeat, which is 18 days to 6 weeks after conception. A baby can suck its thumb, blink, swallow and dream during the second trimester.

Planned Parenthood, America's largest abortion provider, performs approximately 320,000 abortions a year. At $450 per, that is $144,000,000. Plus the $550,000,000 of taxpayer dollars they received in 2018.

We need to make abortion illegal again with the exception of rape or incest. This is murder plain and simple.

Please, please, please voice your opinion on this horrendous, barbaric practice, by contacting the following:

President Trump (202) 456-6213
Sen. Jeff Merkley (503) 326-3386
Sen. Ron Wyden (503) 326-7525
Rep. Suzanne Bonamici (503) 469-6010
Rep. Greg Walden (541) 624-2400
Rep. Earl Blumenaur (503) 231-2300
Rep. Peter DeFazio (541) 465-6732
Rep. Kurt Schrader (503) 588-9100

**Carol Olmstead**
*Wasco*

### Forsythe: B2H would bring industrial blight to cherished valley

To the Editor:

I've read your articles about the B2H (Boardman to Hemingway) power line. How much will it cost the City of La Grande to build those 100-180-foot towers that would obstruct our viewshed of the Grande Ronde Valley?

Do you really care for the pristine view of your valley that your forefathers once viewed when they settled here? Do you want your kids and your grandkids to cherish this pristine country they would be growing up in, or do you want to raise them seeing industrial blight for generations to come?

**Nathan Forsythe**
*La Grande*

### Pridgen: Internet provider should give refunds for outages

To the Editor:

I'm not sure how many customers are affected, but I find it interesting that my internet provider, Frontier, says there are no outages in my area. I have been without internet service for a week now. It is my understanding that there has been a rather catastrophic failure of a piece of equipment. But, no outages. I'm not sure how denying this helps the company's credibility. I guess I'm just thankful I know of a few places where I can get Wi-Fi, otherwise my inbox would be way out of hand by this time. Here's an idea Frontier: own up to the equipment failure. I expect to be refunded for this downtime.

**Pat Pridgen**
*La Grande*

### Write to us

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

The Observer welcomes letters to the editor. Letters are limited to 350 words and must be signed and carry the author's address and phone number (for verification purposes only). We edit letters for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We will not publish poetry, consumer complaints against businesses or personal attacks against private individuals. Thank-you letters are discouraged.

Letter writers are limited to one letter every two weeks.

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

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