

OUR VIEW

New DHS rules aim to keep kids alive

Reading through the state Department of Human Services' public reports on the deaths of children in DHS-involved families is not for the faint of heart. In the past few years, at least a couple of kids were killed in car wrecks when a parent drove intoxicated. One apparently committed suicide, and some died of neglect. A shocking number, according to 14 of 18 investigations in 2018, died as a result of what the department calls unsafe sleep, generally infants sharing a bed, couch or chair with a sleeping parent.

If a bill approved by the 2019 Legislature works as it's supposed to, that could change. The measure, Senate Bill 832, was sponsored by Sen. Sara Gelser, D-Corvallis, perhaps the most outspoken critic of the way DHS handles the state's most vulnerable children. New, tighter rules governing investigations into child deaths were to have been fully in use by Tuesday.

The new law requires that Critical Incident Review Teams be formed within about a week whenever there's a reasonable belief that neglect or abuse was responsible for a child's death. It also beefs up public reporting requirements, in part by requiring information about each CIRT review to be published on the DHS website within 10 days after the report is received.

The reports will allow DHS to draw lessons, if there are any, from specific incidents, increase accountability to the public and allow the agency to make improvements to the system more quickly.

The state's CIRTs from 2017 to today are tough to read. In a perfect world, the reports make it clear that most if not all those children would have been alive today under different circumstances.

Their deaths cannot be undone, but if all the goals are met, they should help make children living in difficult circumstances safer, and that's no small thing.



MY VOICE

Science: Reducing fuel load in forests has little effect on wildfires

The Wallowa-Whitman National Forest is proposing to log the Lostine Wild and Scenic River corridor. The basic justification is to reduce the potential for large wildfires.

Yet according to the Oregon Department of Forestry, in 2019 only 16,868 acres burned in the state, compared to 846,411 acres burned last year. Why the big difference? Is there that much less fuel? If fuel is the reason we are seeing large acreages burn, then why so little this past year?

The obvious reason and what the research shows is that climate/weather is the dominant factor in all large wildfires. If you have drought, low humidity, high temperatures and high winds, you get large fires — regardless of the fuel load. That is why even though the Oregon Coast forests have some of the highest "fuel loadings" in the nation, they seldom burn.

Yet the Forest Service and its lackeys from the Oregon State Forestry School (which gets funding from the timber industry) continues to "sell" the myth that fuels are the problem and logging our forests is the solution.

The Forest Service continues to ignore the growing science that calls into question the efficiency and effectiveness of fuel reductions.

For instance, in a paper that looked at thinning and ponderosa pine forest, Rhodes and Baker found a very low probability of a thinned site encountering a fire during the narrow window when tree density is lowest.

Another review paper by fire specialists at the Missoula, Montana, Fire Lab about fuel reductions concluded: "The majority of acreage burned by wildfire in the U.S. occurs in very few wildfires under extreme conditions. Under these extreme conditions, suppression efforts are largely ineffective."

About the author



George Wuerthner, of Bend, is an ecologist and author. He has published 38 books on environmental and natural history subjects and has worked as a university instructor, Alaska wilderness guide and BLM botanist, and more recently as the Tompkins Conservation Ecological Projects director.

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The authors go on to suggest: "Extreme environmental conditions ... overwhelmed most fuel treatment effects. This included almost all treatment methods including prescribed burning and thinning. Suppression efforts had little benefit from fuel modifications."

The Congressional Research Service found that: "From a quantitative perspective, the CRS study indicates a very weak relationship between acres logged and the extent and severity of forest fires. The data indicate that fewer acres burned in areas where logging activity was limited."

Another review paper published in 2017 found: "Managing forest fuels are often invoked in policy discussions as a means of minimizing the growing threat of wildfire to ecosystems and wildland-urban interface communities across the West. However, the effectiveness of this approach at broad scales is limited.... Regionally, the area treated has little relationship to trends in the area burned, which is influenced primarily by patterns of drought and warming."

Dr. Jack Cohen, who recently retired from the Forest Service Fire Lab in Missoula, Montana, has written extensively about fires and home protection and concluded that: "Wildland fuel reduction may be inefficient and ineffective for reducing home losses, for extensive wildland fuel reduction on public lands does not effectively reduce home ignitability on private lands."

In a 2018 letter to Congress, more than 200 scientists questioned the fuel reduction strategy. To quote from the scientists' letter: "Thinning is most often proposed to reduce fire risk and lower fire intensity.... However, as the climate changes, most of our fires will occur during extreme fire-weather — high winds and temperatures, low humidity, low vegetation moisture. These fires, like the ones burning in the West this summer, will affect large landscapes, regardless of thinning, and, in some cases, burn hundreds or thousands of acres in just a few days."

This is only a small sampling of the science that calls into question the effectiveness of fuel reductions.

Nevertheless, the Forest Service will degrade the forest and scenic corridor largely to provide fodder for the timber industry.

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