

OUR VIEW

Options limited on legislation

Gov. Kate Brown has shown some real leadership over the past 10 days or so, helping get flood relief to Umatilla County and acting decisively regarding the COVID-19 outbreak.

That’s why the announcement last week that she intended to issue an executive order to cut the state’s carbon emissions was a surprise and, ultimately, a wrong approach.

“I will not back down,” Brown said in a statement last week, when the fate of Senate Bill 1530 became official. “In the coming days, I will be taking executive action to lower our greenhouse gas emissions.”

By now most readers — and voters — are probably all too familiar with the latest go-around regarding a plan to slash the state’s carbon emissions. A carbon-slashing bill died in last year’s legislative session. As this year’s short session approached, Democrats once again brushed off the mothballs and developed a new plan to slash carbon emissions. Not surprisingly, Republican lawmakers voiced their opposition and then left the state capitol, effectively ending the 2020 short session.

Brown said last week she would prefer legislation to tackle the carbon emission issue but issued a written statement she would act to “lower our greenhouse gas emissions.”

What, exactly, the governor has in mind is still a mystery, but what should not be a secret is such a move will only hopelessly complicate and darken a political issue that should be left to the voters to decide.

In the end there is plenty of blame to go around about the latest legislative failure regarding the carbon emission limit plan. The blame rests on the inability of lawmakers on both sides to find an effective way forward regarding the emissions blueprint.

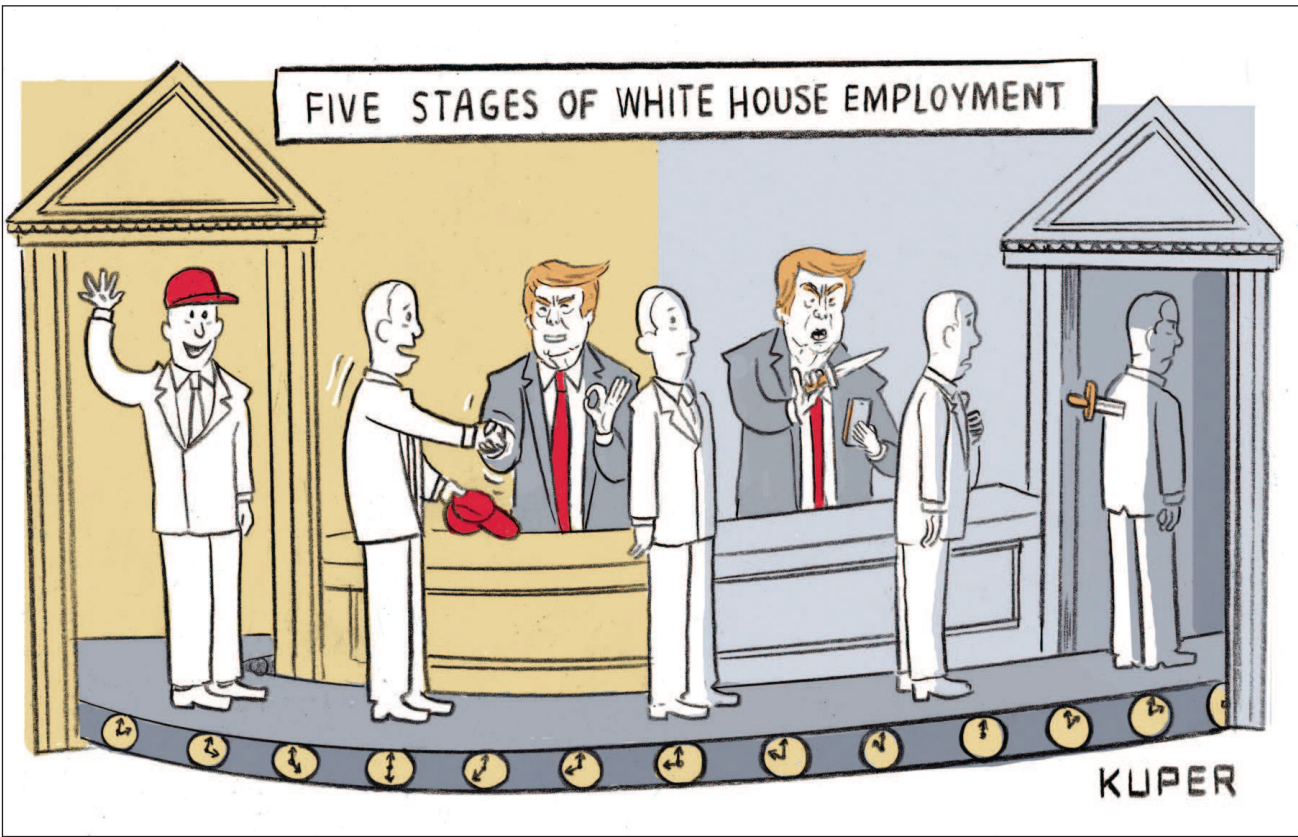
Politics in a democracy is about compromise and it is now hard to see if lawmakers — on both sides of the aisle — are practicing democracy or are simply a mob of elected leaders digging their heels in over partisan dogma.

Is a carbon emission plan right for Oregon? Maybe. But it is increasingly clear the people who should be able to find a solution — our elected leaders — can’t. That means the entire issue should be placed before voters after a decent interval where lawmakers on both sides can canvass the state and explain the pros and cons of the idea.

Such an effort may take time, but it will ensure Oregonians can get the right information to decide for themselves. Issuing an executive order steeped in regulatory language and motives will only make this situation worse.

Oregonians are a pretty savvy bunch. That’s why we think the carbon emission plan should be put on a ballot.

No other option seems feasible now.



MY VOICE

It’s time to definitively act on wildfires

In my youth, I was a wanderer, working in the outdoors wherever I went. That’s included ranching in Australia, farming in Israel, working in fishing and forestry in Norway, and forest and wildlife management in Africa. When I got to the Wallowa in 1999, I didn’t want to wander anymore — my family and I felt at home. A large part of that feeling came from the warmth and character of the community. The other part was the community’s commitment to land stewardship. Joining Wallowa Resources was a natural fit — with its mission to help people make a living from the land. I joined a team investing in people and businesses that take care of the forest, rangelands and farmlands of Eastern Oregon.

In my 20 years in Wallowa County, one thing has become abundantly clear: Our forests have changed considerably over the last century, and so too have our wildfires. Wildfires are more frequent, burning and impacting more acres. Surveys reveal that the overwhelming majority of people understand this — wildfires offer an important opportunity for bipartisan action that can unite Oregonians.

Forest cover across the northern Blues has expanded. Forest stands are characterized by more trees per acre, with more ladder fuels. Our forests have much higher fire connectivity. And our summers are hotter and drier. Rapid fire growth following lightning events with crowning, spotting and wind-driven runs are more common — as we experienced in 2015 with the Cornet-Windy Ridge Fire and the Grizzly Bear Complex Fire.

Three of Oregon’s biggest fire years in the last 50 years were 2015, 2017 and 2018. In the dry forests of Eastern Oregon, it’s no longer about one summer being unusually bad for fires. The northern Blues are predicted to have

About the author



Nils Christoffersen is the executive director of Wallowa Resources in Enterprise. 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, 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande 97850, or email them to news@lagrandeobserver.com.

the greatest increase in fire frequency and severity of any region in Oregon. This poses significant risks to our communities, to homes, to the lives of residents, tourists and firefighters, and to our natural resource way of life.

In rural Oregon, most of our counties haven’t bounced back from the Great Recession of 2008-09 in terms of total employment and revenue. We can’t ignore this kind of risk to our livelihoods and wildlife habitat anymore without doing anything about it.

Even after a fire is put out, recovery is hard in our climate. Fires affect the quality of our air, our water, our soil and our plant life. Wildfires create openings for invasive grasses to move in, further increasing the risk of wildfire spread in the future. The soil can also be affected by fires, causing erosion and reducing a forest’s natural ability to regenerate itself. Prior to the 2020 wildfire season, we need to

organize and act to get ahead of the problem and change things.

That’s why I joined the Governor’s Council on Wildfire Response last year — to bring my training in forestry and my real-life experience working in Eastern Oregon. The council analyzed the systems in place to respond to wildfires and gave our honest assessment of what’s working well and what’s not. We recommended necessary course corrections: fuel reduction through forest thinning and controlled burns, landscape restoration, and proactive community response to protect those most vulnerable to smoke and fire. We recommended a before/ during/after strategy of dealing with fires, from mitigation to suppression to recovery. If we enact these new recommendations, and commit to them for the long term, they should reduce the number of large fires and their impact — their occurrences, size, cost and long-term effects.

We need our representatives in Salem to come through with the leadership, commitment and funding to implement these urgent changes. Evidence from fires across the West is clear — the public and private cost of suppression alone and the wildfire impacts to lives, property, resource values and economic activity is 10 times greater than strategic investment now. It’s absurd to delay action any longer. If we act now, we have a real opportunity to reduce risk and improve the health and condition of our forests, communities and economies for the long run. It’s a win-win.

For too long, this conversation has been polarized by advocates of resource use or protection. We must come together and take a wider, community view about wildfires, based on the values that are important to us as Oregonians — protecting our land, our homes and our businesses.

YOUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

City of La Grande: Mayor Steve Clements, City Manager Robert Strope; P.O. Box 670, La Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-1309; fax 541-963-3333.	Hillock, Todd Nash and Susan Roberts; 101 S. River St., Room 202, Enterprise, OR 97828; 541-426-4543, ext. 11; fax 541-426-0582.	541-786-9611, councilor6@cityofelginor.org ; Risa Halgarth, PO Box 525, 541-437-9462, councilor2@cityofelginor.org ; Rocky Burgess, 800 N 14th St., P.O. Box 854, 541-786-2417, councilor1@cityofelginor.org ; David Reed, 1011 Detroit St., PO Box 368; 541-975-3306, councilor4@cityofelginor.org ; Ryan Martin, councilor5@cityofelginor.org .
Union County Commissioners: Donna Beverage, Matt Scarfo and Paul Anderes; 1106 K Ave., La Grande, OR 97850; 541-963-1001; fax 541-963-1079.	Elgin City Councilors: Mayor Allan Duffy, 501 N 11th St., 541-437-1016, mayor@cityofelginor.org ; Mary West, 260 N 5th Ave., 541-805-0443, councilor3@cityofelginor.org ; Kathy Warren, PO Box 697,	
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Phone:

541-963-3161

Toll free (Oregon): 1-800-781-3214

Fax: 541-963-7804

Email: news@lagrandeobserver.com

Website: www.lagrandeobserver.com

Street address: 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande

POSTMASTER

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