

Other View Preventing wildfires starts at home

A recent study concluded that much of the West is experiencing the second-most severe drought recorded in the past 1,200 years. Currently, 80% of Oregon is experiencing drought. Severe fire weather, of which drought is a significant factor, explains the spate of large blazes that have charred much of the West.

What drives all large blazes is extreme fire weather, which consists of drought, combined with high temperatures, low humidity and, most important, wind. All these conditions are exacerbated by climate change.



GEORGE WUERTHNER
ECOLOGIST

One hears continuously that “fire suppression” and “fuel buildup” are the prime factors in the rising acreage burned annually, but fuels do not drive large fires. If that were the case, we would expect the largest and most frequent fires on the coasts of Oregon and Washington where there is more “fuel” (biomass) than anywhere else in the West.

Despite the assertions from the timber industry and its supporters that thinning and other forest management will reduce fire spread, most “active forest management” enhances fire spread.

Almost all of the largest blazes in the West occurred under extreme fire weather conditions. They burned aggressively on lands that were logged, thinned, or otherwise managed, whether it is the recent fires that charred the western slope of the Oregon Cascades, or the Camp Fire that destroyed 19,000 homes and killed 87 people in Paradise, California.

All significant blazes occurred during episodes of high temperatures, low humidity, drought and high winds. Logging does nothing to change the climate/weather.

This is one reason why more than 200 scientists (whose jobs do not depend on logging) signed a letter to Congress a few years ago that said: “Thinning large trees, including overstory trees in a stand, can increase the rate of fire spread by opening up the forest to increased wind velocity, damage soils, introduce invasive species that increase flammable understory vegetation and impact wildlife habitat.”

The Congressional Research Service reached a similar conclusion: “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.”

I could provide many more such quotes and conclusions.

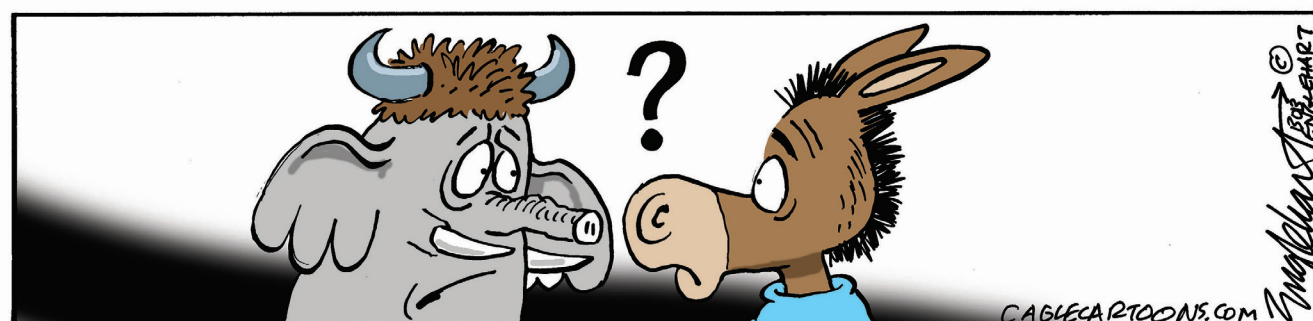
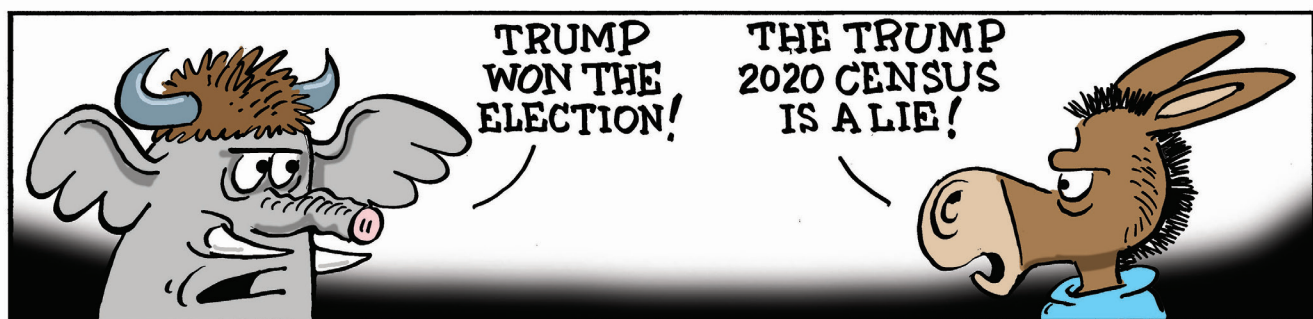
What this suggests is the need to focus attention on fire-safe procedures for communities, not trying to modify the forest.

If the home cannot ignite, it won't burn. Typically, any fuel reduction that is more than 100 feet from a home provides no benefit.

Reducing ignitions is relatively simple. Remove fine fuels like pine needles from roof and gutters. Keep flammable grass, pine needles and dead shrubs away from the home. Get rid of combustible lawn furniture. Put screens on attic vents. These and other measures will significantly reduce the chance of home loss or fire spread through the community.

Chain saws don't change the climate/weather. Given the current mega-drought, we need to rethink how we adapt to the inevitable wildfires. We must start at the home and work outward.

George Wuerthner is an ecologist who specializes in fire ecology and livestock issues.



Other Views Abnormality definitely has its virtues



PETER FUNT
HUMOR COLUMNIST

It's normal these days to applaud the return to normality. But I'm going to miss some of the abnormal stuff we've been doing during the pandemic. The Top 10 things I hate to lose:

10 — Home haircuts. For a year my wife, Amy, has been cutting my hair, but now that we're both vaccinated she's making unsubtle suggestions that it's time for me to go back to Al, whose shop is a 30 minute round trip from our house. Al is a nice guy who keeps me waiting, talks too much, and often nicks my ear. For this I pay \$25 plus a \$10 tip.

9 — Quiet ball games. I loved last year's fan-free games on television. I could have done without the cardboard cutouts but nothing beats watching a TV game without incessant cutaways to rowdy fans.

8 — No-contact takeout. Isn't it

amazing how quickly restaurateurs arranged hassle-free takeout when they had to? You order online, pay in advance, and pop your trunk for the food without saying a word. Why would we ever want to give that up?

7 — Zooming. Sure, some business meetings work better when participants are all in the same room. But with Zoom, no commuting, no waiting, no schmoozing. No shoes? No problem.

6 — Excuses. There will never be a better excuse than the pandemic. “Sorry, I can't come over to see how well your herb garden is doing.” “No, I can't go shopping for patio furniture.” “Alas, I can't schedule that colonoscopy right now.”

5 — Sweatpants. The last time I bothered with zippered pants was March 6, 2020.

4 — No traffic. If by chance you had to drive somewhere during sheltering, what a breeze it was! To my utter astonishment, a two-hour drive to San Francisco during the pandemic took ... two hours.

3 — Grazing. When you're clois-

tered at home, three meals a day can easily become five or six. Nothing takes your mind off not having anything to do like a second lunch, and a third Bloody Mary.

2 — Amazon. The Bezos behemoth isn't going away, but during the pandemic it was a lifeline to everything from electronics to groceries to overpriced toilet paper.

1 — Masks. OK, masks are a nuisance and, for some, a political distraction. But many of us enjoyed hiding some emotion behind a mask. No smiles. No frowns. And, when my dentist told me I needed a new tooth I worried about having a gaping hole for a few weeks. “No one will ever know,” he said. “Just wear a mask.”

I hope whatever the next normal is like, it retains some of what we came to enjoy during the recent normal.

After 15 years hosting the TV series “Candid Camera,” Peter Funt writes frequent op-eds for The Boston Globe and The Wall Street Journal. His new book, “Self Amused,” will be published this summer.

Letter to the Editor

Firearms play a role in our culture, but death accompanies them

There are a lot of traditions and good times and honest enjoyment of this beautiful land based around owning and shooting firearms. We need to accept as a country, though, that there is also a lot of death that accompanies our firearms.

Coming out of nationwide restrictions for a pandemic that has killed over half a million of our fellow countrymen, we've just been presented with two of America's most unique events, mass shootings.

Being in Oregon, I don't think we can ignore the anti-Asian and race-laden elements of the shooting in Georgia. And then in Boulder there is just that great randomness that terrorizes schoolchildren and communities across the country. It isn't likely to happen anywhere, but it happens somewhere all too often. As schools open up, we are lying to ourselves if we don't know that somewhere, in some community, that is going to be accompanied by terrible news and tragedy.

Firearms play a role in hunting, bonding, providing and enjoying the

abundance of our open lands. They are one of man's most impactful and terrible inventions, and we wouldn't be here without them. But there are also so many people who aren't here because of them — I think we need to address that in a real way, and people in a community like this can help with that.

Ask your representatives to support gun control that doesn't enable these continued tragedies. Create a culture that doesn't support all this death.

*Ben Crawford
La Grande*

Election Letters Deadline

Letters deadline for May 18 elections

The Observer does not run endorsements of more than 400 words.

The Observer will institute a deadline for letters to the editor, so we can be fair with all the letters we receive and allow for responses before Election Day, if necessary.

We run local letters of endorsement on a first-come, first-served basis.

Please submit your endorsement letters to the editor by 5 p.m. Friday, May 7.

You can email them to letters@lagrandeobserver.com, or mail them to The Observer, c/o Phil Wright, 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande OR 97850.

We will publish our last letters on Saturday, May 15. Any letters received after the deadline will not run.

Election Day is May 18.

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