

My Voice

The hard reality of Greater Idaho

The devil is in the details. The devil is also in hard realities. Veteran Mike McCarter, president of Move Oregon's Border, wrote an opinion piece in local papers supporting MOB, which wants to force 850,000 Oregonians to become Idahoans and force 75% of the land in Oregon into Idaho.



CHARLES JONES
LA GRANDE

This fellow veteran looks at just eight of a thousand devilish details and realities that would

result from MOB's plan.

1. Snowplows. Those plows that keep our highways and freeways open are owned by Oregon. Will Oregon donate millions of dollars of plows to another state? Is Idaho going to spend millions to buy plows and pay drivers to service nearly all the snow country of Oregon, which is now largely paid for by western Oregon gas taxes? Who will keep our highways clear? MOB volunteers?

2. Prisons and criminals. Several state prisons are in MOB's targeted counties. Snake River Correctional Institution, near Ontario, was first built in 1991. The 1994 addition alone cost \$175 million (not corrected for inflation), the largest Oregon general fund expenditure ever, even to this day. You think Idaho is going to buy? What happens when they don't? Also, there are nearly 3,000 prisoners in that one prison. They are charged with Oregon crimes. They are not guilty of Idaho crimes. Will people volunteer to move the prison structures and infrastructure to Western Oregon?

3. Ontario and Malheur counties. In 2020, Ontario recreational marijuana dispensaries did over \$91 million in sales. Ontario received over \$1.85 million in marijuana taxes in fiscal year 2019-20. Most sales were to people coming from Idaho. Additionally, a huge part of Ontario's retail and most of business growth has been along the border, where Idahoans shop to avoid sales tax on furniture, lawn mowers, clothing and many durable goods. Does MOB hope Ontario (most of the population of Malheur County) will kill their golden-egg goose by becoming Idaho? Not a surprise that almost no one attended the recent MOB rally in Ontario.

4. Buildings. Oregon owns hundreds of million dollars of buildings throughout the MOB targeted counties. As a tiny example, in La Grande alone the building values are staggering. Tens of millions of dollars just at Eastern Oregon University. Then there are Oregon Department of Transportation facilities, Oregon State Police, state forestry, and on and on. MOB leaders may be spending too much time at the Ontario dispensaries if they think Oregon will give that all away.

5. Land. Besides the aforementioned real estate, consider the thousands of acres of state forest in the targeted counties. All the thousands of miles of state highways. All the state parks. Consider the tiniest fraction of these holdings — Wallowa Lake State Park. How many millions is that incredible chunk of land worth? If you owned it, would you just give it to your neighbor? And don't forget the state coastline of Southern Oregon. Talk about pricey real estate!

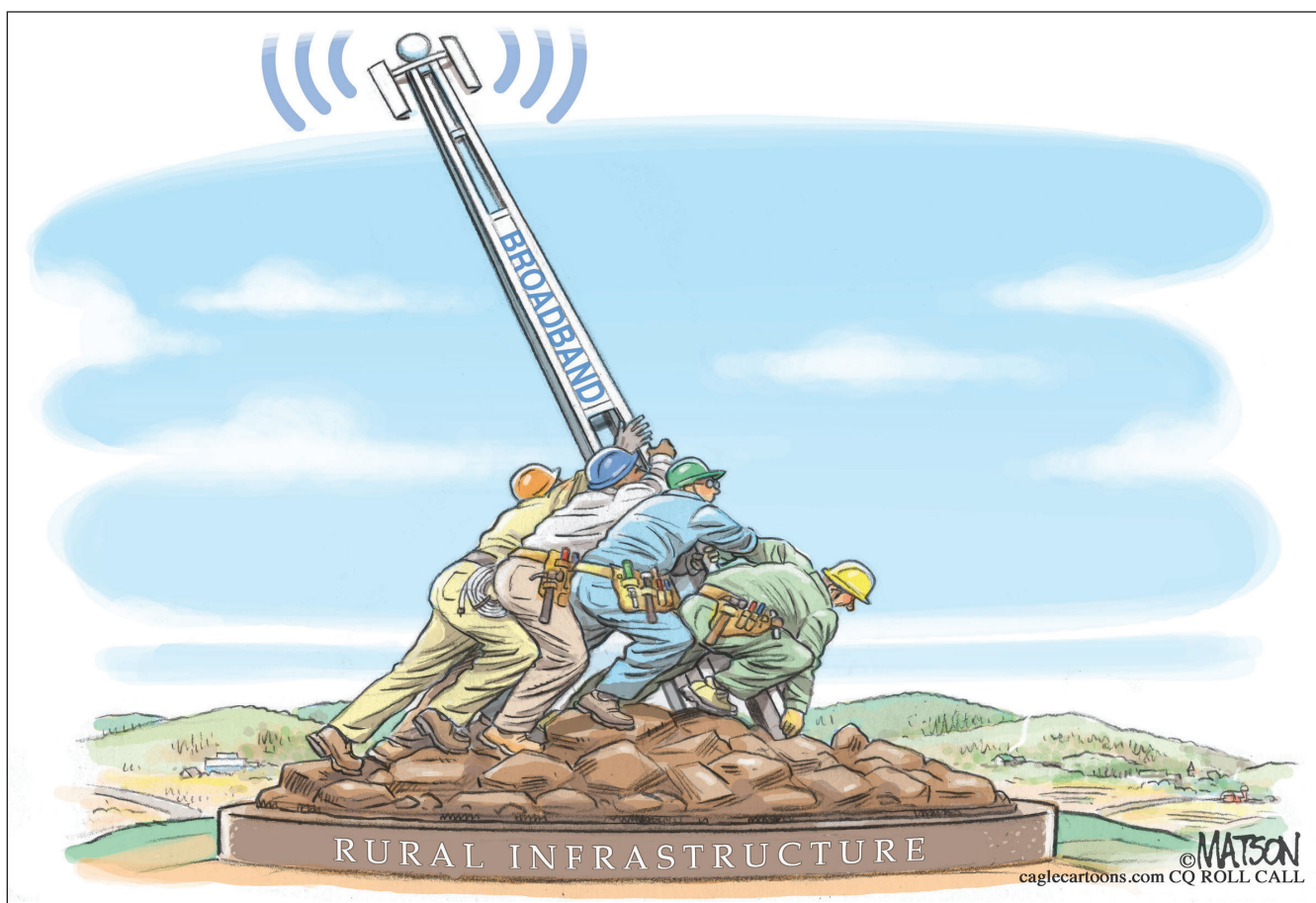
6. Bonds. Oregon owns hundreds of million dollars in bonds issued to service debt on construction in targeted counties. Will Idaho happily take over those bond payments? And who will be paying the accountants and lawyers for incredibly complex transfers?

7. Retirement accounts. Oregon holds retirement accounts for not just state employees, but also for nearly all police officers, firefighters, teachers ... the list goes on. Courts have consistently ruled those retirement contracts are legal and binding. So Idaho will merrily pick up a few billion of debt? Think there might years of paperwork and millions of lawyer fees involved?

8. Licensing. What about our elected judges? Do teachers go back to college to take courses required for Idaho certification? Will nurses, doctors, therapists, counselors, contractors and nearly all professions descend on Idaho for licensing and bonding? Will we hold new elections for our officials (commissioners, mayors, sheriffs, etc.) elected under Oregon law? How many years will we pay for court cases on these issues?

And this is only the tip of that devilish iceberg — that devilish reality of our complicated lives, economy and citizenship in the year 2021.

Charles Jones, a retired navy commander and science teacher, is a fourth generation Eastern Oregonian living in La Grande. His grandfather, as 1920 Ontario's mayor, paved the town's first streets.



Writers on the Range

We blame the trees, but whose fault is it?



PEPPER TRAIL
CONSERVATION BIOLOGIST

Just like you, I live with the fear of wildfire. My Southern Oregon town of Ashland nestles against the foothills of the Siskiyou Mountains, whose forests become tinder in our hot, dry summers. One lightning strike or tossed cigarette on the wrong windy day, and Ashland could be destroyed as completely as the town of Paradise, California, in 2018.

This reality was brought home with terrifying force last September, when a wind-driven wildfire roared through the nearby towns of Talent and Phoenix, destroying over 2,500 residences in a matter of hours. Ashland was largely spared, but only because the wind pushed the fire in another direction. Over the past several years, the city has implemented the ambitious "Ashland Forest Resiliency" project to reduce flammable fuels on thousands of acres of public lands. Tools in the Ashland Watershed include thinning and controlled burns. The project is considered to be a model ecological approach, not mere window-dressing to justify commercial timber harvest as is true of many "forest health" projects. As a homeowner, I've supported the project, and as a conservation biologist, I've been impressed with how it's been carried out.

Yet even as the city and its partners are diligently reducing forest fuels, more and more homes are being built in every nook and cranny of private land abutting the watershed. Many are

McMansions commanding expansive views of the valley below. All these homes are at extreme risk of wildfire. As if the sense of crisis surrounding fuels reduction wasn't enough, this adds another crisis, one we've made ourselves.

Recently, I took a favorite trail leading from the edge of town into the watershed. I always look forward to walking through an avenue of small manzanita trees. In spring, their pink urn-like blossoms are mobbed by bumble bees and hummingbirds. In fall and winter, their berries — the "little apples" that give these shrubs their Spanish name — feed robins, thrushes and bears. Winter storms turn these groves into an enchanted labyrinth of green leaves, red bark and white snow. Not this year. Not again in my lifetime. I found that this once intact and healthy wildlife habitat had been reduced to "defensible space." The manzanitas had been harshly hacked back; those that had been spared stood isolated in a barren expanse of blood-red stumps. I counted the rings on one of the stumps, revealing that it had been at least 55 years old when we decided it was too dangerous to live.

The Forest Resiliency Project considered these manzanitas a threat because they were close to the city limits — and even closer to the big new homes being built outside the city limits.

They were sacrificed to increase our sense of security, and for no other reason. They were mostly healthy and important for wildlife. They shaded the soil and hosted mycorrhizal fungi integral to the nutrient cycles of the forest.

Yes, someday a wildfire would have burned here. But without our presence, that fire would not have been a tragedy, merely an episode in the long life of the land, and an opportunity for renewal. Manzanitas are well-adapted to fire; some species actually require fire for seed germination.

Oregonians take pride in being environmentally aware. Yet we accept the ecological destruction of the "fuels reduction" paradigm, rather than putting limits on our relentless expansion into the rural landscape. Perhaps my town is becoming safer than it was before. But it's questionable that any amount of "thinning" could protect Ashland from a wind-driven firestorm coming out of the watershed.

The fire that destroyed much of Talent and Phoenix, Oregon, like many of last summer's devastating California wildfires, did not start on heavily forested public land.

Instead, it ignited and roared through a typical valley mosaic of creekside woodlands, orchards and residential neighborhoods. The hard truth is that for Ashland and many other towns around the West, avoiding catastrophic wildfire is as much a matter of luck as preparedness.

Still, we have to try, right? That means some degree of fuels reduction. But we must acknowledge the losses to the ecological integrity, the habitat value, and the beauty of this land that we love so much.

Pepper Trail is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He is a conservation biologist and writer in Ashland.

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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