

OUR VIEW

Oregon Forest Resources Institute still needed

The Legislature created the Oregon Forest Resources Institute 29 years ago during the timber wars, which featured battles over logging, fierce debates over the role of state and federal forests in the timber industry and, most remarkably, the protection of the northern spotted owl under the federal Endangered Species Act.

The stakes were huge for Oregon's economy. Since 2001, the timber industry has lost 15,000 direct jobs — a drop of almost 18%.

The Legislature's primary goal was to create an agency that would provide information and educational material to the public and schools about the timber industry and how it operates.

The problem: The legislation creating the OFRI was vague about how that would be done.

Fast forward to 2021 and a state audit that found the institute needs more oversight and direction.

The audit, requested by Gov. Kate Brown, followed criticism that the OFRI had lobbied the Legislature. Though many state agencies have "legislative liaisons" that do pretty much the same thing, critics felt the institute was out of line.

Any confusion can be attributed to the poorly written state law.

"Portions of OFRI's statute are broad and vague, contributing to this ongoing lack of clarity as to what exactly OFRI is and what rules it is expected to follow," according to the audit.

The legislative record referenced in the audit shows lawmakers themselves were unclear about how the institute should operate. If legislators didn't know and didn't write a law that was clear, how could OFRI's leaders know?

The audit compares the OFRI to the 22 commodity commissions, which the state Department of Agriculture oversees. The trouble with that comparison is that in 1991, when the OFRI was created by the Legislature, commodity commissions weren't state agencies. They were taken under the ODA's wing years later because of a series of judges' rulings that found the state could not require growers to give money to private commissions.

By transforming the commissions into state agencies the Legislature solved that problem. That allowed them to promote the crop and fund research — and lobby the Legislature.

With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, the Legislature probably could do the same with OFRI, except put it under state Department of Forestry instead of the ODA.

We would encourage legislators to consider doing that.

In the meantime, the audit makes four suggestions to the OFRI and one to the Legislature. In its response, the institute's director agreed to all of them. They include writing a single mission statement to follow and policies to make OFRI staffers follow what the state statute appears to say but does not specify. Again, the statute is the root of the problems.

Earlier this year, some legislators tried to slash the OFRI's budget — which comes from the timber industry in the form of harvest taxes — as some sort of retribution for past transgressions, real or imagined.

That would be wrong.

The OFRI can and should play a role in keeping the public informed about the timber industry, which continues to be an important part of the state economy.



A twist in the race for governor



DICK HUGHES
OTHER VIEWS

The craziness known as Oregon politics took another twist last week.

An Oregon-bred national journalist jumped into next year's race for governor — maybe.

Nicholas Kristof grew up on a farm outside Yamhill before heading off to Harvard, a Rhodes scholarship and eventually two Pulitzer Prizes as a New York Times reporter and columnist.

Journalists seem mesmerized by Kristof's potential candidacy, comparing it with Oregon's legendary Gov. Tom McCall, who ascended from the newsroom. Of course, those were different times, and Republican McCall, besides the exposure provided by his journalism career, had the political experience of a losing bid for Congress and being elected secretary of state before running for governor in 1966.

For the record, I've known Nick since he was a high school journalist at the McMinnville News-Register, where my professional career began. I'm not making an endorsement of him or any candidate. That is not my role as a columnist. Since Nick is a friend, it also would be a conflict of interest to speculate on whether he should run, whether he could win and whether he would be a good governor. I'll leave that to others.

Mark Hester, a former Portland journalist turned communications consultant, wrote an insightful piece about Kristof on The Oregon Way blog.

"I have no interest in running for governor, but as a semiretired journalist who grew up on a farm and has lived in Oregon the past 25 years I do have some thoughts on traits that voters should expect from gubernatorial candidates and whether growing up on a farm or working as a journalist would help produce those traits," Hester wrote.

Hester went on to list his opinion on desirable traits in a governor, adding: "In other words, success in executive office, especially elected office, often comes down to temperament and leader-

ship. Where you grow up and your profession play a role in forming your temperament and forging leadership skills but so do a lot of other things."

However, the political reality is that the No. 1 asset for becoming governor is electability.

In Oregon, that means A) being a Democrat, unless you're the unusual candidate who is sufficiently conservative to win the Republican gubernatorial primary yet sufficiently centrist to appeal to a broad swath of independents, Democrats and Republicans at the general election; and B) have powerful financial and volunteer support, as is personified by Oregon's public employee unions, unless C) the chaos in Portland, plus burgeoning dissatisfaction with the state's direction, opens the door for a savvy, centrist, well-financed independent candidate.

You'll note that A and B seem contradictory. As for C, The Cook Political Report rates Oregon's 2022 gubernatorial race as among the nine nationwide that are solidly in the Democratic win column.

If anyone had doubts about the impact of Oregon labor unions, those should have been dispelled by last year's race for secretary of state.

After former state Rep. Jennifer Williamson abruptly dropped out, state Sen. Shemia Fagan jumped in three months before the Democratic primary — and won, defeating more middle-of-the-road candidates. Fagan had an advantage that she already was a darling of Portland progressives, with her self-described reputation as a fighter and her raised-fist commitment to progressive causes. But she won because unions overwhelmingly backed her with their financial might and manpower.

Fagan, by the way, has said she would not run for governor in 2022.

Speculation has centered on other well-known Democrats: Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum, State Treasurer Tobias Read, Labor Commissioner Val Hoyle, Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury, House Speaker Tina Kotek and union leader Melissa Unger.

A host of legislators and other officeholders also are quietly evaluating whether to stay put, leave politics or go for the governorship.

A few lesser-known candidates, such as Yamhill County Commissioner Casey Kulla, already have formally declared their candidacy.

As a former state treasurer, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler would have been a likely contender. Instead, the city's turmoil has him facing a possible recall election.

For the most part, potential candidates have offered little clarity in recent days when asked about their ambitions. The typical answers — none of which tells us anything official — are that they're focused on their current job or they're evaluating their political future, or they have no comment. Barring an outright denial of interest, such answers suggest they're conducting polling, checking potential support and determining whether there's a viable path to make it through the Democratic primary and into the governorship. Candidates also spread unofficial word of their candidacy to lock up support and deter challengers. Under the Oregon Constitution, a candidate for governor must be a U.S. citizen, at least age 30 and have resided in Oregon for the three years prior to being elected.

Eight Republicans have filed campaign committees. They include Salem oncologist Bud Pierce, the Republican nominee in 2016.

As for columnist Kristof, he'd planned to keep his political interest mum for now. Here's what happened, as he described this week in his newsletter, which is going on hiatus:

"I had tried to keep this secret, but since I've spent a career trying to ferret out the secrets of others, maybe it's karma that mine was reported. An Oregon newspaper, Willamette Week, correctly reported over the weekend that I'm considering running for governor of Oregon, and other news organizations including The Times have reported on this since. ... In June, I told my editor that I was thinking of a political run, and we agreed that to avoid any perceived conflict of interest, I would take a leave until I made a decision. If I decide to run, I will depart The Times. If I decide not to, I'll return to the column."

Dick Hughes has covered the Oregon political scene since 1976.

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