

OUR VIEW

Large forest fires show the need for action

The time for allowing vast tracts of forest on state and federal lands to remain untouched from management is long over. Now, elected leaders and state and federal officials need to develop a comprehensive, actionable plan before every summer provides voters with a blaze such as the Bootleg Fire now scorching lands in Southern Oregon.

Thankfully there already is some progress being made to find a way to manage our forests, so they do not become massive tinderboxes ready to explode when hit by lightning. For example, Gov. Kate Brown created the Governor's Council on Wildfire Response in 2020. The board's mission is to review Oregon's existing model for wildfire prevention and determine if it is still valid.

During the recent legislative session, Senate Bill 762C was passed in the House and Senate. The bill casts a wide net but, among other things, requires public utilities that provide electricity to develop and execute wildfire protection plans and directs the Oregon State Board of Forestry to create rules to develop a statewide map of wildfire risk.

So, good first steps are evident from the state. Yet considering the massive Bootleg Fire, far more needs to be done.

First, a comprehensive, full-scale plan needs to be developed, certified and put into place for all of Oregon's forests regarding fire mitigation. The plan should be effective, uncomplicated and funded appropriately.

Second, a solid determination needs to be made regarding the viability of logging forests to help mitigate fire risk. The subject is controversial and, in many circles, considered a nonstarter. Already, though, some salvage logging is a common tool in fire restoration yet is almost always bitterly challenged by conservation groups.

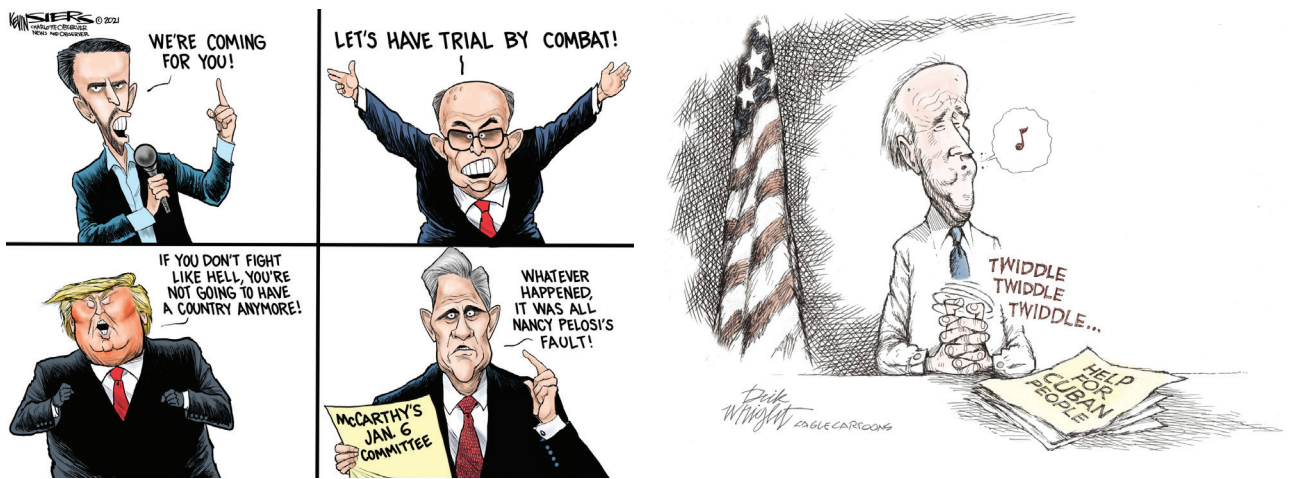
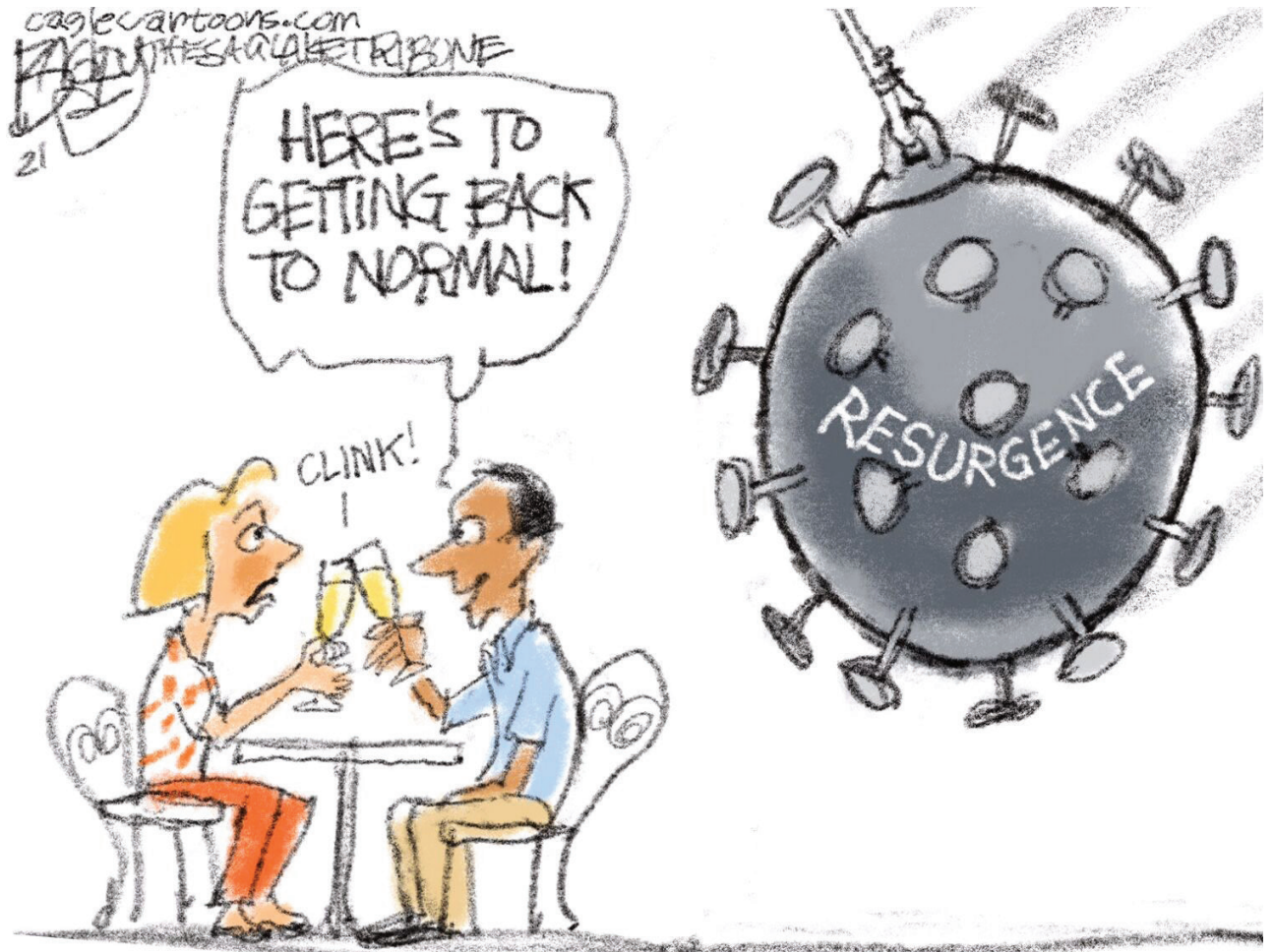
But we cannot continue to allow large uninhabited sections of federal and state forests to essentially rot and await a solid lightning strike to erupt into major fires.

Finally, unfortunately for taxpayers, more money needs to go into a plan to safeguard our forests.

At this point there is no denying climate change plays a role in the terrible forest fires burning in Oregon, but changing the climate paradigm will take years and we don't have decades when it comes to our forests and the damage fire delivers to them.

We cannot sustain blazes like the Bootleg Fire indefinitely. If the Bootleg Fire is a harbinger of things to come, then we need to act fast.

There is no time to waste regarding the health of our forests.



Stay informed on Oregon wildfires



ANDREW CUTLER
FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

We've added a new feature to our websites across the six east-side newspapers of EO Media Group that I think is needed, unfortunately.

On each of our news websites there is a tab where all our wildfire coverage is collected. Click on the tab and readers will be able to catch up on what is going on across the state and see updates on the progress of blazes.

I think the feature is a good one and will help give our readers a sense of the magnitude of the fires that are scorching huge chunks of forest across Oregon.

While I believe the new feature is a great asset, I, of course, wish it wasn't necessary. The vast size of this summer's blazes took me by surprise, and when I read our coverage on the wild-

fires I always feel a little sad. That's because I have spent so much time recreating in this great region of ours, and it pains me to see the areas I've considered as places of refuge go up in flames.

Yet, part of our job is to ensure our readers are informed. That can be a challenge when we are covering a breaking news story like a wildfire that is constantly changing. First, we want to make sure we get the most accurate information available to our readers. Then we want to deliver comprehensive coverage, news stories that provide context and background on how the fires started and the damage each one inflicts upon our fellow Oregonians.

In our modern era we are in many ways more connected to one another than ever before, but in some ways I'd argue we also are further apart.

Social media provides a platform of connectivity unlike anything seen before, but we also live in a secluded region of the

state where cities and towns are spaced far apart. Yet, what occurs in say, Baker City, can eventually have an impact on a place like Pendleton. The recent forest fires are a good case in point. While the Bootleg Fire — one of the largest in the U.S. — is burning in Southern Oregon the residual impact of the blaze — smoke — is impacting not only Oregon but most of the nation.

That is a different kind of connectivity, but a real one that we all must live with when the sky becomes choked with smoke.

I believe our new wildfire landing page furnishes our readers with an up-to-date resource so they can stay informed and understand what's happening around them.

So don't forget to check it out, and be careful out there.

Andrew Cutler is the interim editor of The Observer and the regional editorial director for the EO Media Group, overseeing The Observer, East Oregonian and four more newspapers in Eastern Oregon.

CONTACT YOUR REPRESENTATIVES

U.S. PRESIDENT
Joe Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20500
Comments: 202-456-1111

U.S. SENATORS
Ron Wyden
221 Dirksen Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510
202-224-5244
La Grande office: 541-962-7691

U.S. SENATORS
Jeff Merkley
313 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510
202-224-3753
Pendleton office: 541-278-1129

U.S. REPRESENTATIVE
Cliff Bentz
2185 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
202-225-6730
Medford office: 541-776-4646

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