

OUR VIEW

# Public interest requires release of details

When people die in a heat wave, should their names, addresses and race be a matter of public record? A total of at least 83 people died from hyperthermia in the June heat wave. Some, most, or perhaps all of those deaths were likely preventable. Yes, there were government warnings about the heat wave. Weather broadcasts said it was coming. Still many Oregonians don't have air conditioning. Never really needed it. Older people are especially vulnerable to hyperthermia. The body just can't regulate the temperature from the environment and their body temperature keeps climbing.

Two media outlets — The Oregonian and The Portland Tribune — requested the names and addresses of the people who were confirmed to have died from hyperthermia during the heat wave. The Oregonian also requested the races/ethnicities. The state medical examiner said no. The argument was those records are conditionally exempt from disclosure. That basically means they are exempt from being made public unless there is a good argument that the public interest demands it. The medical examiner said releasing the records might make future death investigations more difficult. Families may not want to cooperate if they know the results could be made public. And in these incidents some families had asked that the information be kept private.

But there is an interest in knowing more about who died. With the information requested, the public could better understand if people in some geographic areas or of some socioeconomic background or minority status were disproportionately affected. The public could then hold their government accountable. The Oregon Attorney General's Office agreed with that argument, at least a version of it, and ordered the release of the records. In the order, it noted that it has required the medical examiner to disclose "the name, month and year of birth, date of death and cause of death for each person whose death was determined to be a homicide" for similar reasons of public interest. It's not clear yet if the recent order will be challenged in court. We agree in this case that the public interest outweighs the state medical examiner's argument. But what do you think? You can write us a letter to the editor and send it to [letters@lagrandeobserver.com](mailto:letters@lagrandeobserver.com).

**EDITORIALS**  
Unsigned editorials are the opinion of The Observer editorial board. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of The Observer.

**LETTERS**  
• The Observer welcomes letters to the editor. We edit letters for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We will not publish consumer complaints against businesses, personal attacks against private individuals or comments that can incite violence. We also discourage thank-you letters.  
• Letters should be no longer than 350 words and must be signed and carry the author's name, address and phone number (for verification only). We will not publish anonymous letters.  
• Letter writers are limited to one letter every two weeks.  
• Longer community comment columns, such as My Voice, must be no more than 700 words. Writers must provide a recent headshot and a one-sentence biography. Like letters to the editor, columns must refrain from complaints against businesses or personal attacks against private individuals. Submissions must carry the author's name, address and phone number.  
• Submission does not guarantee publication, which is at the discretion of the editor.

**SEND LETTERS TO:**  
[letters@lagrandeobserver.com](mailto:letters@lagrandeobserver.com) or via mail to Editor, 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande, OR 97850



# River Democracy Act benefits everyone



**RANDY KNOP**  
OTHER VIEWS

As our state and the Western U.S. deals with record heat, drought and wildfire, we are reminded of the importance of water to every Oregon community. These conditions underscore the urgent need to protect the sources of clean water: our rivers, streams and their tributaries. That is why I am pleased to support Sen. Wyden and Sen. Merkley's River Democracy Act. This is at once a visionary and prudent measure that will ensure the values of the waterways that support our way of life — like the Upper Grande Ronde, Umatilla, North Fork John Day — are protected. As historic and important as this legislation is, still, only 6% of Oregon's waterways would be protected. What makes this legislation particularly special is that it was built from the bottom up using input from Oregonians here, and across the state, to determine which waterways to include. In late 2019, Sen. Wyden invited Oregonians to nominate the rivers and streams that were important to them, their families, businesses and communities. More

than 15,000 nominations were submitted and considered, forming the backbone of the River Democracy Act. It is truly a bill for Oregonians by Oregonians, as we all stand to benefit from protecting our rivers. The past year has shown us all how important our public waters are as people from all walks of life sought refuge in our forests, streams and meadows. They gathered safely with friends and families, fished and hunted, and physically and emotionally healed from one of the greatest challenges our country has faced in a generation. Protecting our waterways is a net positive for Union County and for Oregon. Doing so will help ensure continued access to clean drinking water, preserve access to the waterways that support our way of life, help fuel a thriving outdoor recreation industry and support the fish and game that draw anglers, hunters and wildlife watchers. The bill protects these important values while allowing the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service to mitigate fire risk and carry on existing activities. It was also encouraging to see the proposal go beyond simply naming big iconic rivers. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act allows smaller waterways and different types of

waterbodies to be protected. Several smaller tributaries like Beaver, Lookingglass and Five Points creeks are also included. Those, and other tributaries, feed cold water into the larger streams and help support fish and wildlife. Supporting our rivers means supporting our creeks and streams. Sens.—Wyden and Merkley were wise to recognize this important fact and built a bill that takes a holistic approach to protecting a critical resource. Clean, cold water is an irreplaceable resource. If this warming trend continues, as it is expected to, that resource will become ever scarcer and more precious. The recent heat wave and current drought demonstrate how important it is to have more — not less — water available. It is sound policy to be thinking now about how to protect and preserve access to waterways while also accounting for other uses and human safety. The River Democracy Act accomplishes all of the above, and its passage would be a win for Union County and a win for Oregon. I encourage my friends and neighbors to join me — and so many others — in supporting this important legislation.

*Randy L. Knop lives in Union and is the vice-chair of the Union County Democratic Central Committee.*

## 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

**SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION**

**SUBSCRIBE AND SAVE**

NEWSSTAND PRICE: \$1.50  
You can save up to 55% off the single-copy price with home delivery.  
Call 800-781-3214 to subscribe.

Subscription rates:  
Monthly Autopay .....\$10.75  
13 weeks.....\$37.00  
26 weeks.....\$71.00  
52 weeks .....\$135.00

**THE OBSERVER**  
An independent newspaper founded in 1896

[www.lagrandeobserver.com](http://www.lagrandeobserver.com) Phone: 541-963-3161

Periodicals postage paid at Pendleton, Oregon 97801  
Published Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays (except postal holidays) by EO Media Group, 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande, OR 97850 (USPS 299-260)

The Observer retains ownership and copyright protection of all staff-prepared news copy, advertising copy, photos and news or ad illustrations. They may not be reproduced without explicit prior approval.

COPYRIGHT © 2021

**STAFF**

Regional publisher..... Karrine Brogotti	Multimedia journalist..... Alex Wittwer
Regional circulation director..... Kelli Craft	Home delivery advisor..... Amanda Fredrick
Interim editor..... Andrew Cutler	Advertising representative..... Juli Bloodgood
News clerk..... Lisa Lester Kelly	Advertising representative..... Amy Horn
Reporter..... Dick Mason	National accounts coordinator..... Devi Mathson
Reporter..... Davis Carbaugh	Graphic design..... Dorothy Kautz
Intern..... Carlos Fuentes	

A division of

**EO MEDIA** group  
eomediagroup.com