

OUR VIEWS

New way to draw districts

Was anybody really surprised that Oregon legislators couldn't agree on redistricting? We weren't, and we're guessing you weren't either.

It's too political. There's too much at stake — control of the Legislature and the majority of Oregon's seats in Congress. Democrats have that clinched for now and perhaps for the future.

Does Oregon need a new way of redistricting? It's long been suggested that a nonpartisan commission draw the lines rather than the almost certainly partisan process of the Legislature. There's been efforts to get it on the ballot before. And on Tuesday, Oct. 5, as *The Oregonian* reported, it was announced there would be a new effort to get the idea of an independent redistricting commission on the ballot in 2022.

"The promise of fair representation should not be a pawn in a partisan political game," said Norman Turrill, chair of the People Not Politicians campaign and former president of the League of Women Voters of Oregon.

Would an independent redistricting commission solve the problem?

Maybe. We'd like to see the idea on the ballot.

Could the districts be compact, relatively equal in population, not divide communities and protect minority representation?

Could a group of people, not politicians, look past their political leanings and try to make it as fair as possible?

The new process would likely also be imperfect. It certainly feels better than asking politicians to draw their own districts.

Evidence is Oregon's elections are sound

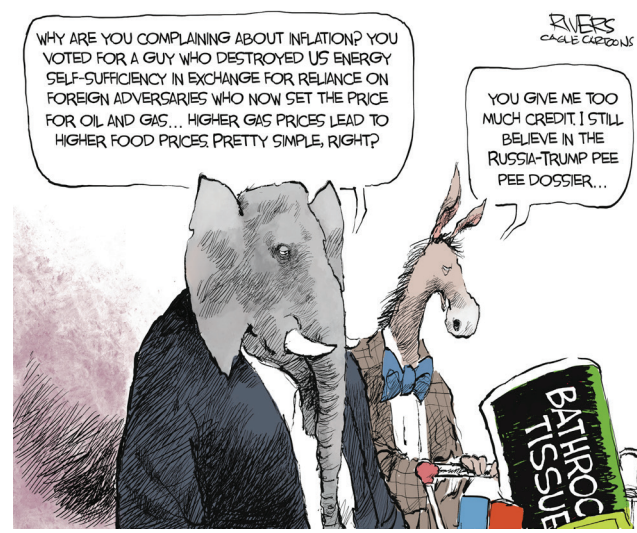
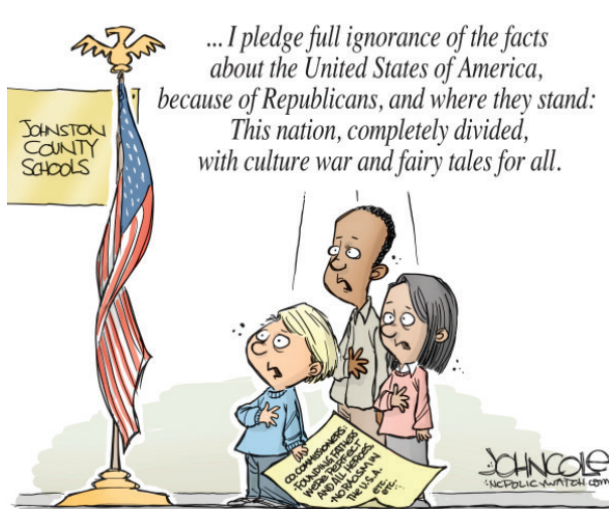
Over and over again these days election integrity comes up. People question if voter fraud swings elections.

It's good to ask. But there's a lot of information that indicates Oregon's elections are sound.

Remember former Oregon Secretary of State Dennis Richardson? He was a Republican. He looked into it. He was not the kind of guy to hide problems. When he was a legislator, he warned early on about problems with Cover Oregon, the state health care marketplace that floundered. When he was secretary of state, he issued the scathing audit that revealed the many problems with how Oregon takes care of foster children. But when he looked at the integrity of Oregon's election system, he came away impressed.

Look at the information that is available. The Legislative Fiscal Office did a comprehensive review. There is good information available on the secretary of state's website: sos.oregon.gov/elections/Pages/security.aspx.

It's good to continue to ask if Oregon elections are secure and if enough is being done to ensure their integrity. But the answers are reassuring.



Keeping elk on public land

BILL ANEY
THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

Where are all the elk? It's a common question heard every fall around campfires and wood cook stoves in the Blue Mountains. Hunters share any number of theories about why they can't find elk: too many predators, too many hunters, too many motor vehicles, not enough (or too much) logging, too much cattle grazing, bad herd management — the list is long and imaginative.

The Blue Mountains have the potential for some of the world's best quality habitat for Rocky Mountain elk. There are about 55,000 elk in the Blue Mountains, and in most areas the herds are near the states' management objectives. So why do some hunters have a hard time finding elk? As is often the case, it's not about numbers, it's about distribution.

Elk like to be where they can find good habitat without being disturbed. Traditionally elk would spend the spring, summer and fall in the Blue Mountains where they found cooler temperatures and shade, plentiful water and lush forage. With the arrival of winter snow, they migrated to lower elevations, only to repeat the cycle in the spring and follow the green-up into the hills.

But some elk in the Blues have changed their habits to avoid public land, spending more time on lower elevation private lands where hunters and motorized vehicles don't disturb them. By the time elk rifle season rolls around, the elk

have been pushed around for several months by bowhunters and deer hunters, and in increasing numbers they have moved off public lands to get the security they crave, well before the winter snow.

Private landowners greet this development in a variety of ways. Some are pleased just to see elk on their land. Some want elk so that their family and friends can hunt, and some are finding ways to monetize this public resource by charging for hunting and/or access on their property. And some landowners want no elk on their land because elk eat the same feed as domestic livestock and have a habit of destroying fences.

I maintain that we need a way to hold more elk on public lands through the fall. This is good for public land hunters, obviously, but it also would reduce conflicts with agricultural interests. I also confess that I don't like the idea of private landowners selling the rights to hunt native wildlife when those animals should be on public lands.

How do we keep them there? The science is known — and it's local. Projects completed on the La Grande Ranger District have demonstrated how managing vegetation and reducing disturbance from motor vehicles can turn around this problematic migration pattern. Forest thinning and prescribed burning creates quality feeding areas that are especially attractive to elk in the late summer and fall when they are trying to put on the calories for winter.

But quality feed is useless to elk if they are constantly disturbed by motor vehicles. With over 4,500 miles of roads on the Umatilla National Forest, elk often abandon

areas used by cars, pickups, ATVs, motorcycles and the like. Fortunately, the Umatilla National Forest has a travel management plan that identifies only a subset of these roads as open to motor vehicles, with the remainder closed for all or part of the year.

This is a good thing for elk as it improves habitat security and can ultimately increase public land elk hunting opportunities when elk relearn to stay on public lands later in the fall.

However, this requires that we all know what roads are open to traffic and which are closed, and follow the plan. A new cooperative venture between the Forest Service, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Oregon State University Extension Service should help. The effort will be highlighted in the 2022 big game hunting season synopsis, as well as on signboards at National Forest entry points and in printed brochures and downloadable digital maps.

In the meantime, elk hunters need to learn which roads are closed to motor vehicles in their hunting area and commit to driving only on open roads.

The Forest Service Motor Vehicle Use Maps are available for free download on their website and paper copies in the forest offices.

We also need to be supportive of forest thinning and prescribed burning projects, recognizing that the high quality habitat that results will attract and hold more elk and improve the odds for public land hunters.

Bill Aney is a forester and wildlife biologist living in Pendleton and loving the Blue Mountains.

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THE OBSERVER
An independent newspaper founded in 1896

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)

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POSTMASTER Send address changes to: The Observer, 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande, OR 97850

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