

OUR VIEW

Oregon created illegal pot crisis

Seven years ago, Oregonians were told that by legalizing marijuana and hemp they could solve an array of problems. Pot smokers could come out of the shadows and hemp could take its place as a legitimate crop. Illegal pot growers would be put out of business — or at least forced to register under the state’s auspices.

State officials estimated millions of dollars would come tumbling into the state’s coffers that would go to schools and cover the costs of regulating the crop.

By 2020, legal marijuana sales in Oregon topped \$1.1 billion a year, and state tax revenue exceeded \$150 million. According to the state Department of Revenue, 40% was earmarked for the state school fund, 20% for mental health, alcoholism and drug services, 15% for the Oregon State Police and 5% for the Oregon Health Authority for drug treatment.

The problem: Enforcement of the pot and hemp law has taken a back seat. Illegal marijuana grows are overtaking some parts of the state. It’s gotten so bad in Jackson County that the commissioners there declared a state of emergency and sent a plea for help to Gov. Kate Brown and legislative leaders.

Neighboring Josephine County faces the same problems. The sheriff there estimated hundreds of illegal pot grows are spread throughout the southwestern Oregon county.

Some legal hemp farms serve as camouflage for illegal marijuana grows. Nearly 50% of the registered hemp farms in Oregon illegally grow marijuana, according to the Oregon Health Authority and the Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission. About 25% of registered hemp farms won’t let state inspectors in.

All of which constitutes an emergency of the highest order. Once pot growers — and hemp growers who cultivate pot illegally on the side — decide to flout the law, all bets are off. They are telling the state of Oregon they don’t care what the law says and are thumbing their noses at the authorities. And the state is letting them get away with it. Illegal growers steal massive amounts of water and use illegal chemicals, threatening the livelihoods of legal farmers.

To her credit, the governor is making more cannabis law enforcement grants available and told the state police to increase its efforts. The Oregon Department of Agriculture is expanding its hemp program from four to 12 staffers. Every little bit helps, but that’s not nearly enough.

Jackson County commissioners alone say they need six more code enforcement officers; the sheriff’s office needs 34 more staffers, including 18 detectives; and the state Water Resources Department there needs three more staffers just to handle water-theft complaints.

And that’s just one county. Other counties report similar illegal pot problems.

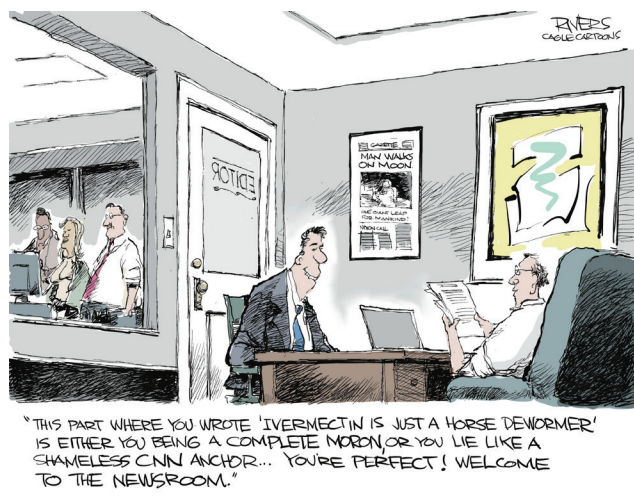
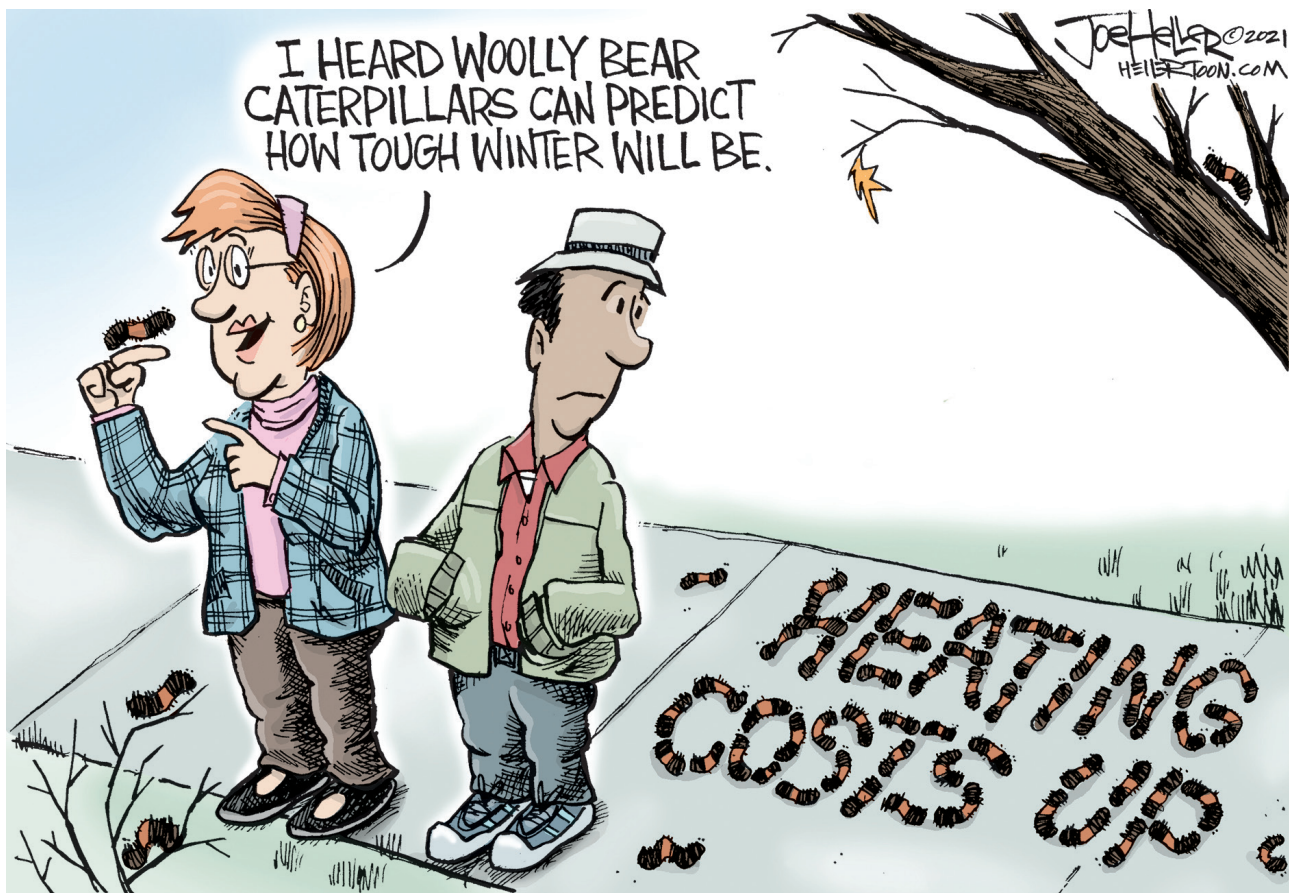
Oregonians, including growers who follow the law, are being hurt because of the state’s lax regulation of pot and hemp.

Oregon’s leaders have failed the public. They have allowed illegal pot growers to operate at will.

It’s time for the governor and her administration to fix this crisis, which they helped create.

When Oregonians approved the legalization of marijuana and hemp, they were told the state would do a good job of regulating the crops and get rid of illegal growers.

The state at all levels has failed to live up to its part of the bargain. It’s time for the authorities to saddle up and get rid of the problem they have allowed to overrun our state.



The hidden danger of wildfire burn scars

MARY WISTER
EYE TO THE SKY

The Western U.S. has faced another busy wildfire season, and nearly all large wildfires lasted for weeks — or even months — before they were fully contained. Many wildfires continue to burn as I write this article.

What a relief to see the words “100% contained,” knowing that the fire will no longer threaten additional landscape or property.

However, is the threat of any additional damage completely over? Unfortunately, the answer is no.

Wildfires, no matter how big or small, will leave a burn scar on the landscape. Fires in steep terrain are particularly susceptible to significant erosion. The depth of the burn scar will depend on how long the fire resided and how hot the fire burned.

Ash and burnt soil do not absorb water. All it takes is water to suddenly wreak havoc as it combines with ash and loose soil to flow down the side of a mountain or steep hill and threaten any object along its path. If precipitation falls at a faster rate than the soil can absorb, the more significant the debris flow will be.

On July 31, 2016, the Rail Fire ignited about 10 miles southwest of Unity. The fire burned more than 41,000 acres in both the

Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur National Forests. A year later, in September 2017, a thunderstorm produced flash flooding along the South Fork of the Burnt River. Fortunately, there were no injuries. However, four campgrounds were impacted by a massive amount of mud, and the campers who evacuated witnessed a potentially deadly situation.

One of the biggest challenges with forecasting debris flows is the time to research the damage from a wildfire before the rain occurs. Heavy rain can occur while the fire is burning, and there is little to no evidence of how deep the soil has burned.

Some post fires are evaluated by a Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) team that can greatly assist in understanding the severity of a wildfire, and the team often prescribes mitigation goals to reduce the threat from burned scars and fragile slopes, but there may not be enough time to accomplish these preventative measures prior to the next precipitation event.

National Weather Service forecasters have the ability to overlay fire perimeters with radar and satellite imagery and focus on showers that approach wildfires and burn scars. Flood watches and warnings may be issued as needed. Despite the dedication of the NWS forecasters to protect those from flooding and flash flooding, situational awareness is highly important for those who

reside near burn scars.

If you are near steep terrain recently burned by a wildfire, look out for rocks that can easily slide down the slope and cause injuries or death. Is the terrain barren, or covered with trees? Tree roots can limit the amount of runoff, as long as the trees are not fully scorched with weak roots. Visually observe the depth of the ash on the ground. (Never stick your hand or foot into the ash. Ash and stumps can retain heat long after a fire has burned.) By observing the terrain and the weather, you will be better prepared for debris flows.

One question often asked is “When do we no longer have to worry about wildfire burn scars?” That depends on the severity of the burned area. Debris flows can occur two to three years after a wildfire — possibly longer.

If a burned area shows no signs of vegetation, then consider it a continued threat.

The website www.weather.gov/safety/flood-hazards provides excellent safety tips for floods and flash floods.

Mary Wister is a meteorologist and fire weather program manager at the National Weather Service in Pendleton. Wister serves as an incident meteorologist when large wildfires or other natural hazards necessitate an Incident Management Team’s quick response to protect life and property.

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