

OUR VIEW

Research shows value of thinning forests

The benefits of thinning crowded forests and igniting prescribed fires to get rid of the combustible debris that’s left hardly qualify as newly discovered truths.

But recent research led by scientists from the College of Forestry at Oregon State University, besides adding to the evidence that such work helps protect forests from catastrophic wildfires by reducing the fuel load, also shows that in some cases thinning alone can yield tangible advantages even before the managed flames are kindled.

James Johnston, a research associate at OSU, and his colleagues published their findings in Forest Ecology and Management. The study, which looked at years of data from areas in ponderosa pine forests in Northeastern Oregon, “shows that mechanical thinning can moderate fire behavior even in the absence of prescribed fire,” Johnston said.

Johnston and the other researchers, including Julia Olszewski, Becky Miller and Micah Schmidt from the College of Forestry, Lisa Ellsworth from OSU’s College of Agricultural Sciences, and Michael Vernon of Blue Mountains Forest Partners, used computer modeling to predict how fire would behave in areas that were thinned, as well as forest parcels that weren’t.

Their research showed that although fuel on the ground increases for a year or two after thinning, the amount declines thereafter, as does the amount of litter and duff on the forest floor.

The researchers’ findings are important not because they diminish the importance of prescribed fire.

Indeed, Johnston notes that prescribed burning “is still a key tool for meeting fuel reduction and fire management objectives in the ponderosa pine forests of the southern Blue Mountains and elsewhere.”

But Johnston also points out that prescribed burning, for a variety of reasons, can take longer to be approved compared with thinning.

“Less than one-fifth of the area treated with mechanical thinning in the southern Blues has also been treated with prescribed fire,” he said. “Prescribed fire has been significantly slowed by budget constraints, local opposition to fire use, and restrictions imposed by COVID-19 response measures.”

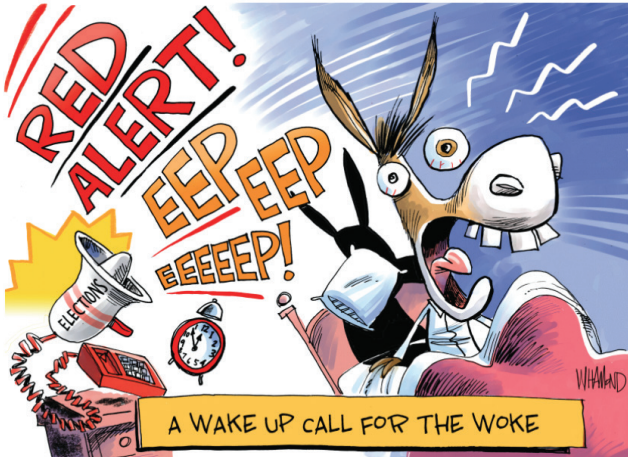
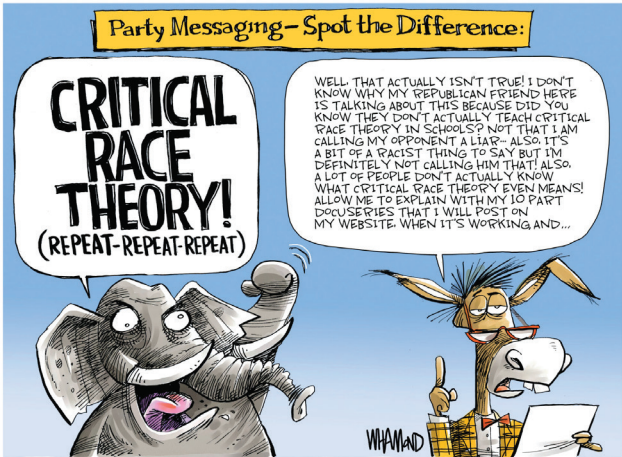
Weather can be an impediment, too. Prescribed burning usually is done during spring and fall, but in some seasons it’s either too wet for effective fires, or too dry to light them without the risk of flames getting out of control.

Congress has over the past decade or so allocated more money for projects, including thinning and prescribed burning, in Eastern Oregon and elsewhere. An example is the East Face project, which includes about 48,000 acres of public land from the Anthony Lakes Highway north to the Ladd Canyon area. The East Face project includes thinning — some of which involves trees large enough to be sold to mills — and prescribed burning. Much of the work is along roads and ridgelines and is designed to create fuelbreaks, places where fire-fighters would have a better chance of stopping a wildfire. In all, Congress has spent more than \$17 million between 2012 and 2020 to thin about 215,000 acres in the southern Blues.

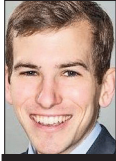
The research from Johnston and his colleagues shows that this public money is being well-spent, and that lawmakers should seek to accelerate the effort.

With climate change leading to longer and often more severe fire seasons, thinning and prescribed burning are more vital than ever.

It’s gratifying to see scientific proof that thinning by itself helps protect forests.



Heeding Tom McCall’s words, Oregon needs two types of courage



KEVIN FRAZIER
OTHER VIEWS

“You could say that my administration produced a classic continuing example of bullet-biting. In fact, we’ve bitten the bullet so often, it’s a wonder we haven’t contracted lead poisoning.”

Tom McCall, the two-time governor of Oregon, offered that quip during a farewell speech in 1974. He then lamented the seemingly incessant presence of “reactors (to innovative government ideas) who are barren of imagination and courage in their own right, that knock down everything you try, with the languid flick of a finger.” In those lines, McCall outlined two characteristics that seem as hard to find as a Nintendo Wii during Christmas of 2012.

The first characteristic is the courage to think over a longtime horizon. Gov. McCall did not shy away from challenging the idea that the government could solve every problem. Time and again, he called for better coordination between government agencies, for more transparent government, and for more accountability in government. All of these suggestions — requiring the

hard and time-intensive work of rigorously asking which aspects of the government have become too rusted to even turn — are not short-term political winners.

Few communities mobilize around the vague concept of “good governance.” That’s why upending ossified state bureaucracies requires a deep appreciation for the future well-being of Oregonians.

Yet, in recent decades, few champions of an honest and thorough reform of government have emerged. Few have been willing to bite the bullet.

McCall went a step further than just calling out the government for inefficiencies. He also broke what appears to be a modern rule — asking civil society and citizens in general to help solve public problems. In calling for an “age of volunteerism,” McCall celebrated more than 2,000 Oregonians volunteering to assist the Department of Human Services.

The people could have rejected Gov. McCall’s invitation to serve, but they instead welcomed the opportunity to do work that’s likely best suited for community members rather than bureaucrats unfamiliar with the community norms and values that exist around the state.

The second characteristic is a willingness to call out those who prefer to obstruct rather than experiment. One of the greatest threats to solving

a problem is allowing too many parties to veto any proposal. In an age of special interests, that power has been extended to far too many groups and individuals these days.

As McCall pointed out, improvement and innovation require courage, but that courage is in short supply these days.

Too often, it seems we prefer to imagine worst-case scenarios rather than those that could unlock greater human flourishing across Oregon.

McCall was not a perfect governor, but he was a governor that leaned into these two characteristics, which Oregonians desperately need to see from our next leader. If we bite the bullet on things like heavily investing in early childhood education, workforce development, and public health, and if we channel the courage to again be a model of good governance, then we can all “feel certain that Oregon has a place in the destiny of the world leadership ... that this state is a lodestar for the wavering pace of the American society.”

Kevin Frazier formerly led Passport Oregon, which helped young Oregonians explore the state’s outdoors. He operates No One Left Offline, which has distributed nearly 100 Wi-Fi hot spots throughout Oregon. Kevin will graduate from the University of California, Berkeley School of Law in May 2022.

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