

OUR VIEW

Why the delay in paid leave?

We have written before about how unfortunate it was that late in the 2021 legislative session a bill popped up to delay Oregon's paid family medical leave program.

It was created by the Legislature in 2019. Families would be able to get paid time off — not only for births and deaths — but to care for others when they need it. Some employers already offer that. The bill was a way of guaranteeing it to more people by January 2023. Gov. Kate Brown thanked state Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, for his leadership in helping to get the bill passed.

But why was implementation delayed?

The state's Employment Department said it couldn't get it ready by the beginning of 2023. It was pushed back to September. That means, as The Oregonian pointed out, "tens of thousands of Oregonians stand to go without approximately \$453 million in paid leave benefits they could have accessed in the first eight months of 2023."

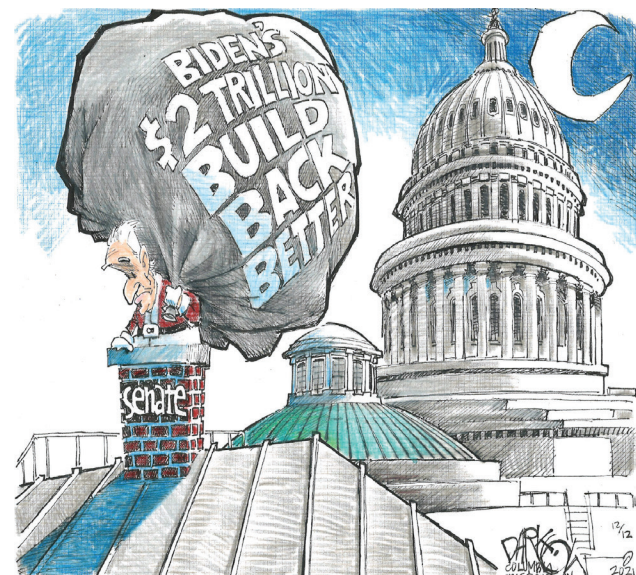
"This is an aggressive timeline in the best of times and as you know, the past year hasn't been the best of times," the program's acting director, Gerhard Taeubel, told lawmakers in February.

Brown declined an interview with The Oregonian to explain her staff's oversight of launching the program. Despite indicators the launch was off track, her office didn't ensure the launch stayed on track and neither did legislators. A local legislator did try. Former state Rep. Cheri Helt, R-Bend, did attempt in 2020 to shift the program's oversight to the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries, in the hope it had the capacity to keep it on track. She also proposed setting up a legislative committee to monitor the program. Those good ideas went nowhere.

An exodus of employees from the paid leave program, allegations of discrimination in its ranks and an ensuing investigation could further complicate the rollout at a time when the pandemic has laid bare the massive need for parental and medical paid leave. Last April, an unidentified member of an advisory group to the paid leave program warned that delays in launching the program could adversely affect communities of color and lower income workers most in need of the benefits, according to meeting notes.

If the state's current plans succeed, it will have taken Oregon 50 months from when lawmakers passed the paid family and medical leave legislation to begin paying benefits to Oregonians.

Maybe with the pandemic and the disruptions it caused there was little hope the program would launch on time. But legislators and Gov. Brown don't appear to have done enough to try. The Oregonian's article on this topic is worth reading if you have access: tinyurl.com/noORleave.



Cheatgrass will take over Owyhee



NORM CIMON
OTHER VIEWS

I have a lot of respect for Joel Hasse, but he needs a clearer understanding of what the dry Owyhee uplands — and the rest of the interior Northwest — are facing. The idea that keeping development from the sagebrush lands has caused introduced species to spread is upside down. It's actually the only thing that might keep them intact.

After 50,000 years drying out, we now have the same climate as Central Asia. That was made clear to me many years ago when the PNW lab in La Grande hosted the then leader of the Russian Forestry Service, Alexander Isaev (he joked that he'd gotten the job because he had complained so often to Gorbachev). Waking up that morning and looking out his window, he thought he was back at his first posting in the Russian steppes. That's how similar those two ecosystems look.

There is, however, a crucial difference. That faraway part of the world has had 6-12 million un-glaciated years for the vegetation to evolve, so the plant communities from Eurasia are ultra-competitive in the interior Northwest. They can quickly replace the native bunchgrass, and that's what they do after a range fire or if the grass and sagebrush have been degraded or eliminated.

How did those alien plants get

here? When the settlers first came to this part of the world: those who knew what they were looking at soon realized that wheat would be a well-adapted crop and a money-maker. So it was that they imported the type that grew from eastern Europe into the Asiatic dry-lands. That decision also planted the seeds of drastic change for the sagebrush ecosystem. Those wheat crops often included a grass that couldn't be harvested. It left the farmers feeling cheated.

That's where cheatgrass — *Bromus tectorum* — got its common name. It's an annual and the first plant to bloom in the spring, taking up all the moisture and drying out the soil for the native vegetation. While it's just one of many such invaders, it's considered "the most significant plant invasion in North America."

Look around and you'll find it all over Union County. Here's an overview:

Bromus tectorum is an alien grass that dominates disturbed ground in shrub-steppe ecosystems of the western United States and Canada. Cheatgrass reproduces only from seeds, germinates in the fall or winter, expands its roots over winter, and rapidly exploits the available water and nutrients in early spring. Cheatgrass is common in recently burned rangeland and wildlands, winter crops, waste areas, abandoned fields, eroded areas and overgrazed grasslands. Although cheatgrass readily invades perennial forage crops and rangeland under

poor management, it also invades communities in the absence of disturbance.

In undisturbed sites, cheatgrass will most commonly spread along soil cracks and work its way outward into the natural community. Cheatgrass can persist in unpredictable environments because seed germination is staggered from August until May.

That list of adaptations is breathtaking. One example: On Idaho 51, which slopes down to the Snake River south of Mountain Home, everything you see in all directions is cheatgrass. That's not because the area is protected — it's because the native plants were eliminated or burned out and downy brome, another name for it, moved in.

As mentioned above, if cheatgrass is anywhere nearby, it can also invade undisturbed areas. Given this reality, the scientific community has even recommended triage: identify those areas that can't be salvaged, try to eliminate it from the areas where it has just arrived, and protect the places that haven't been invaded. There is no way around this. Our genetic resources are at serious risk unless we act to keep cheatgrass as far away from undisturbed areas as possible.

I'll leave it to you to figure out what that means for the Owyhee country.

Norm Cimon, of La Grande, is a member of Oregon Rural Action, a nonprofit, but his column represents his personal opinion.

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THE OBSERVER

An independent newspaper founded in 1896

www.lagrandeobserver.com

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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