

OUR VIEW

# Rivers act needs more input

Political hyperbole aside, U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz's concerns raised during a floor speech of the U.S. House of Representatives regarding a bill to protect more than 4,500 miles of rivers and streams in Oregon as part of the federal Wild and Scenic Act are valid and deserve more than a passing glance by voters.

Bentz lambasted the River Democracy Act, a bill sponsored by U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley and U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, on Jan. 11 and labeled it as a sure way to create more, rather than fewer problems for forests in the eastern part of the state.

Bentz implied the act would leave forests dangerously exposed to become, essentially, tinderboxes.

At first glance, the legislation — now stalled in the congressional committee — appears to be a commonsense way to protect the forests and watersheds we all enjoy. Supporters of the River Democracy Act say it would add protections to waterways, lessen wildfire risk, enhance drinking water, and expand recreation to help rural economies.

The act also promises that only federal lands would be protected while private property and water rights would be safeguarded. A key piece of the legislation is a move to widen the area along protected waterways from one-quarter mile to half a mile.

There are a few problems with the legislation, though, not the least of which is what appears to be a lack of input from rural lawmakers at the county level. While supporters of the bill proudly proclaim voter participation through "nominations" from 2,500 Oregonians, the plan triggered resistance from several Eastern Oregon county governments.

Commissioners in Union, Wallowa, Grant and Malheur counties have called the legislation into question with a variety of concerns, including federal overreach and lack of detailed maps.

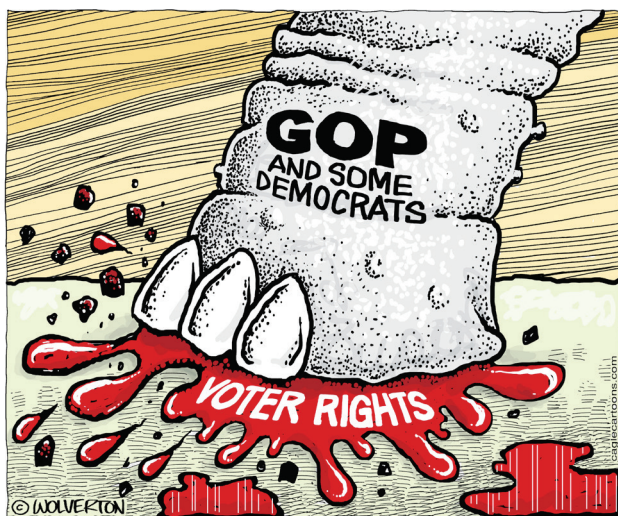
One of the act's most serious problems, though, isn't visible up front. Legislation safeguarding public spaces is crucial and deserves support. Yet, there are already numerous state and federal laws on the books — including the 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act — that provide a firm foundation for conservation. Too often legislation is created without a careful study of unintended consequences.

The bill may appear to be a winner for urban voters who wish to utilize Eastern Oregon as a handy natural resource-rich theme park for tourists, but for those who live and work in this area, its possible unintended consequences are a real worry.

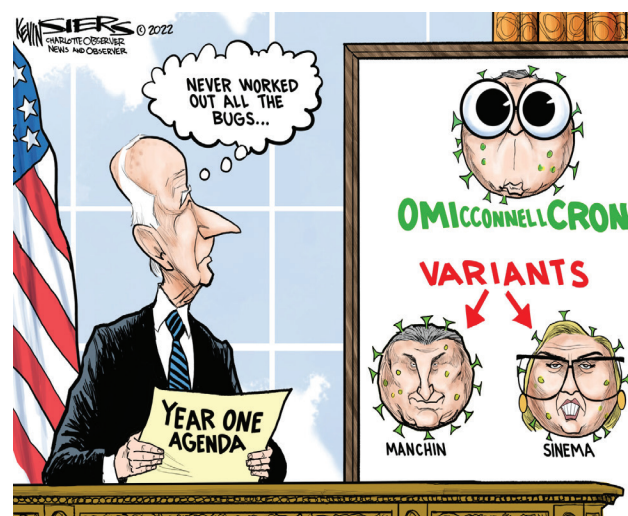
To move forward, the bill needs more input from local county lawmakers.



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# The best management for our forests is to stop logging



GEORGE WUERTHNER  
OTHER VIEWS

One of the arguments alleged by proponents of thinning or logging forests is that it would preclude wildfires and reduce carbon emissions from wildfire. Proponents argue that more trees survive a fire if there has been "active forest management."

The problem with such ebullient pronouncements is that they fail to provide a full accounting of the carbon losses and emissions.

A number of studies that reviewed carbon emissions conclude that logging and wood processing emits far more carbon than a fire.

For instance, one study estimates that logging in the United States releases five times the carbon as wildfire, bark beetles, wind thrown, land use conservations, and drought combined.

Another Oregon study calculates that 35% of the carbon emissions in the state results from the wood products sector, while wildfires average approximately 4%.

Making matters worse is that logging advocates fail to consider

that in thinning the forest, you are killing trees. The problem is that where and when a fire will occur is unpredictable. The majority of all thinned acres never encounter a fire. Some estimates suggest less than 1-2% of all thinned acres experience a fire when they might potentially influence fire behavior and tree mortality.

As one group of researchers concluded: "Thinning forests to reduce potential carbon losses due to wildfire is in direct conflict with carbon sequestration goals." They go on to state that "the amount of carbon removed to change fire behavior is often far larger than that saved by changing fire behavior, and more area has to be harvested than will ultimately burn over the period of effectiveness of the thinning treatment."

In fact, one estimate suggests it may take 100 years to replace the carbon loss resulting from forest management.

Thinning larger areas to decrease the probability of high-severity fire ensures decreased carbon stock and net carbon balance over the treated area.

Let us say 50% of the trees are removed in a thinning project, that is 50% of the stored carbon. So

even if a thinned stand burns at lower severity and most trees survive a fire, the net result is still a significant loss of carbon due to the logging's tree removal.

Plus, in logging the trees (killing them), you reduce the future carbon storage that would have otherwise occurred had the trees remained in the forest.

So, we get a guaranteed removal of carbon and carbon emissions with logging/thinning that contributes to climate warming, which is, in turn, contributing to more fires.

Even if a forest stand burns in a high severity fire where the majority of trees are killed, most of the carbon remains on the site as snags, branches, charcoal and roots in the soil.

A further problem is an assumption that logging the forest will preclude large high severity blazes (where most trees are killed). However, there is abundant scientific and anecdotal evidence that logging does little to prevent large wildfires.

The best management for our forests and climate is to stop logging our public forests.

*George Wuerthner is an ecologist who specializes in fire ecology and livestock issues.*

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