OUR VIEW

Private enterprise shines in climate change efforts

Not to be critical of government, but if you want something done, you're usually best off looking to private enterprise.

It's not that government can't do it, it's just that government too often gets in the way of itself — and everyone else.

Take, for example, efforts to slow climate change. At the state and federal levels, a hodgepodge of climate programs has emerged over the years. Most are aimed at jacking up oil and gas prices.

By doing that, they are supercharging inflation, which is now 7.9%, the highest it's been since 1982.

The federal government has been particularly inept in its climate efforts. It has subsidized "green" companies such as Tesla, which in turn has built factories overseas, including China, the biggest climate polluter on the planet. That country produces 30% of the world's carbon dioxide and continues to add to its fleet of 1,110 coal-fired power generation plants to run all of those Chinese-built Teslas.

By comparison, India operates the second-largest number of coal-fired plants, 285.

In the meantime, the federal government has also discouraged domestic oil and natural gas production while going to countries such as Venezuela, Iran and Saudi Arabia looking for more oil.

In Oregon, the unelected bureaucrats in the Department of Environment Quality are doing an end-run around the Legislature with their "Climate Protection Program."

In Washington, the Department of Ecology is aiming at forcing refineries to reduce their greenhouse gases by 28% in four years.

That means consumers and businesses — you — will ultimately be saddled with higher gasoline and diesel prices.

The carbon footprints of Oregon and Washington are minuscule compared to those of China, India and Russia, or even California. What we in the Northwest do to slow climate change matters, but not very much. Washington produces about 0.19% of global carbon emissions, while Oregon produces about 0.17%. That's according to each state and the Our World in Data website.

With that in mind, we were greatly interested in a new private enterprise effort that appears to have all of the trappings of success. Organic Valley, a cooperative of organic dairy farmers, last month announced its Carbon Insetting Program as a means of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050.

This program is the essence of simplicity. Instead of setting up some confusing government-style effort that requires a battalion of new employees, Organic Valley will pay co-op members for reducing their carbon footprint. More efficient lighting and coolers, installing solar panels, planting trees and better manure management are among the activities that will reduce or offset carbon dioxide and methane production.

The efforts will be certified by a third party, SustainCERT, to determine the impacts.

In return, the farmers will receive the market rate, about $15, for every metric ton of carbon that is either sequestered or otherwise prevented from entering the atmosphere.

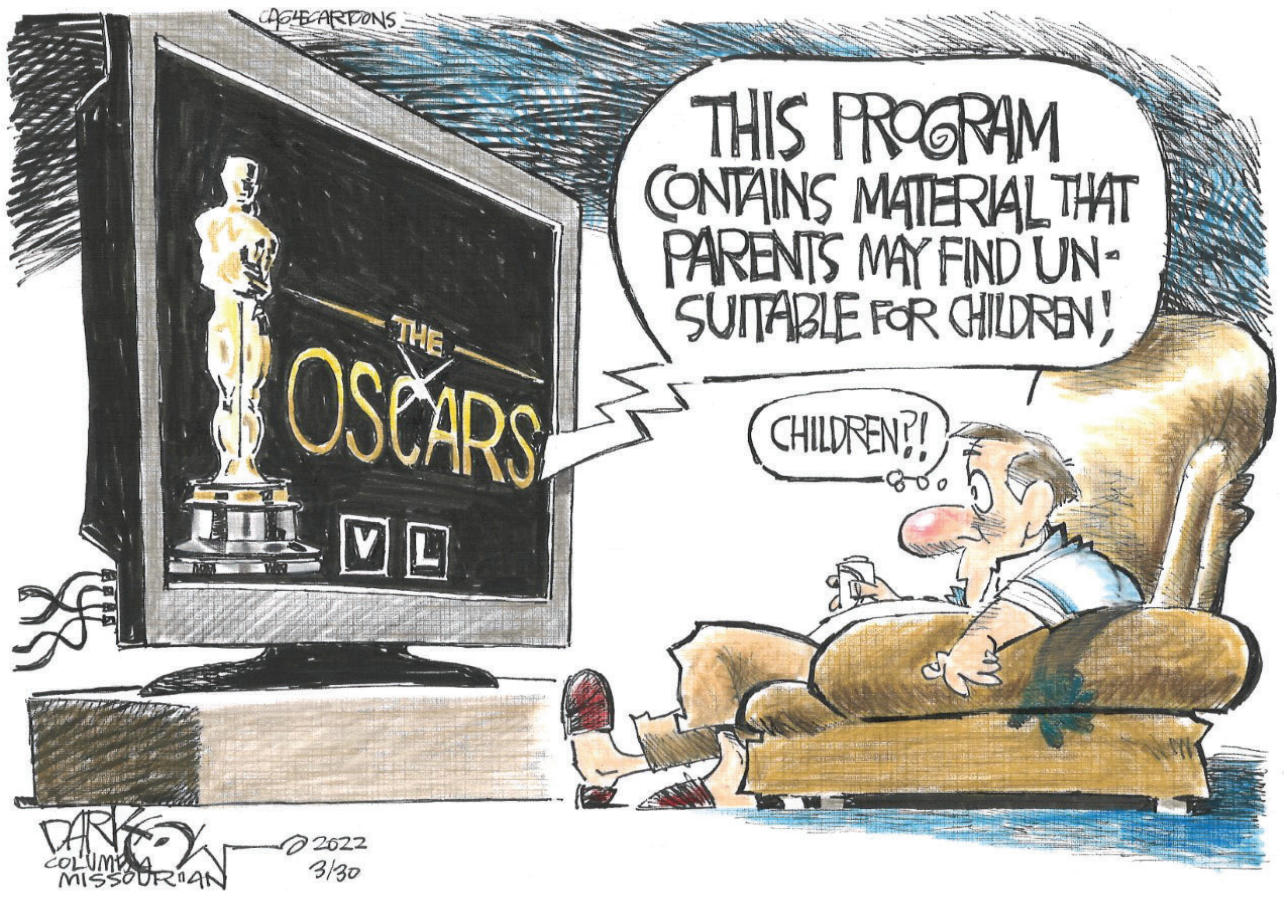
Others in agriculture are developing efforts that will similarly reduce their impact on the climate.

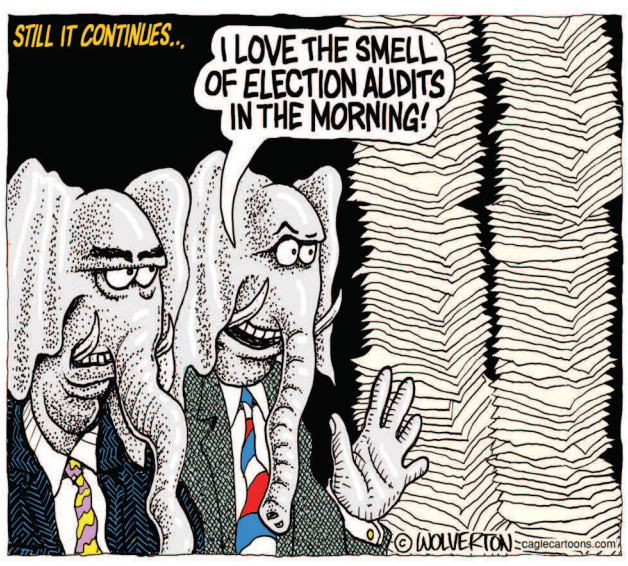
They all have several characteristics in common. They are simple, meaningful and effective.

Those are three characteristics generally missing from government climate efforts.

A suggestion: Maybe the government should stick to encouraging private enterprise to reduce its carbon footprint instead of pushing programs that will cost consumers, businesses, farmers and ranchers.

Our confidence is in private enterprise. If government wants to help, that's fine. It just shouldn't get in the way.





Oregon faces bleak water outlook

RANDY STAPILUS
OTHER VIEWS

Earlier this month Gov. Kate Brown, at the request of local officials, declared a drought emergency for Klamath County when snowpack in the area fell to 60% of normal.

That news didn't make the top headlines on the county government's website last week, but another water emergency did: A serious drying of residential wells.

An information sheet from the county said, "Temperatures have been warmer than normal; precipitation has been significantly lower than normal; soil moisture has been at or near historic lows as have stream flows. As a result of these drought conditions, aquifers that support many domestic wells in the Klamath Project area have received less recharge than normal resulting in an unprecedented number of domestic wells going dry or producing less water than is needed."

Some help is coming.

The state Department of Human Services is making water deliveries to owners of dry wells through March, at the county's request. How long that will last is uncertain.

Of course, if you expect a water supply problem to hit first anywhere in Oregon, the Klamath Basin, based on all the struggles it has had over many years, would be a good first bet.

But it won't be the last.

Improved precipitation in the last three months has brought snowpack levels at least closer to normal — but not all the way yet. At the end of last year Mount Hood webcams showed hardly any snow on Oregon's highest mountain. The snowpack's measure there near the end of 2021 stood at 0.3 inches, about 2% of the historic median.

Historic snowpack levels by decade (going back a half century) were highest in the 80s, nearly as solid in the 90s, dropped a little in the 2000s, and collapsed in the 2010s.

The snowpack affects farmers, homeowners, businesses — directly or indirectly, everyone in Oregon.

Some of the best numbers for figuring where the state is on water supply can be found in the Snotel reports, a water data bank run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, measuring levels down to checkpoints in small streams.

One of the key stats is the snow water equivalent, a quick read on the snowpack, which supplies a lot of the runoff water used through the year. A "percent of median" shows how that number compares to the past years.

The oldest Snotel chart online, from 1978, shows a median for the Malheur watershed at 175, the John Day at 191, the Willamette at 81 and the Rogue at 68. Those are not unusual numbers for most years since then.

This month, just three water basins — the Coast (treated as a single basin), the Willamette River and the Owyhee River — are above normal. Most of the rest are well below normal.

This is the regional piece of a larger picture.

A recent large-scale study of the changing snowpack by a group of federal and university researchers found, "Future mountain snowpacks are further projected to decline, and even disappear, but at unknown rates. While the complete loss of snow is the worst-case scenario, a plausible situation … [would involve] a shift from rare or short term to more persistent low-to-no snow occurrences."

The report added, "Low-to-no snow will impose a series of cascading hydrologic changes to the water — energy balance, including vegetation processes, surface and subsurface water storage and, ultimately, streamflow that directly impacts water management."

The snowpack problem is not new. The U.S. Forest Service is among the organizations that has been looking into this for some years.

What's gotten less attention is that many approaches to dealing with it are likely to be local and regional. Many answers to Oregon's drought will have to come from Oregon.

What can Oregon do?

Conservation, of course, and some proposals at the Capitol and elsewhere to curb climate change could help in the long term. More surgical approaches could accomplish a lot locally and sooner.

A list of Forest Service options suggests some of them: Increase in-stream flows with dry-season water conservation to reduce withdrawals … Increase upland water storage … Develop mitigation measures and strategies to compensate for loss of snowpack location and duration … Restore and enhance water resource function and distribution at the appropriate watershed level. Prioritize watersheds based on condition and a variety of resource values, including wildlife … Reduce riparian impacts by storing more water on the landscape.

Along with this: Increase research into our water management options so they're as thoroughgoing as our research into the size of the problem.

With this message comes the urgency: We need to do more than just fret.

■ *Randy Stapilus has researched and written about Northwest politics and issues since 1976 for a long list of newspapers and other publications.*

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