

OUR VIEW

# When farmers came through for the U.S.

When COVID-19 arrived in the U.S. from China a little more than two years ago, it set off a tsunami of uncertainty among the 328 million Americans, none of whom had ever been through anything like it.

Researchers scrambled to understand the strange new virus even as it infected vast swaths of the population. While many cases were mild — or even presented no symptoms at all — others were fatal.

In the midst of this crisis, farmers, ranchers, processors and farmworkers were all called upon to feed the nation.

By any measure, it was not easy. The ever-changing regulatory landscape made what was already a difficult job even tougher.

In the end, U.S. agriculture performed spectacularly. Fears of food shortages disappeared, and food boxes and government benefits were increased so no American had to worry about eating.

All of this happened against a backdrop of record unemployment, workplace upheaval for those who still had a job and, above all else, uncertainty as advice, directives and regulations changed, sometimes from day to day.

Even after vaccines were found to be effective and widely available, suspicions remained and some people refused the life preserver. This was their right, but it also diminished a means of stemming the tide of COVID.

Some critics say the government — and private employers such as farmers and processors — didn't do enough to protect employees. With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, they say they should have been provided with more masks, plastic dividers and other tools.

Some critics have faulted agencies such as OSHA for not being aggressive enough, while others said they were too aggressive.

In a time when facts were few and fears were many, these agencies were doing their best.

In 2020, the Oregon Farmworker COVID-19 Study interviewed upward of 300 farmworkers. They said that even in the early months of the pandemic 77% of their co-workers wore masks all of the time and 68% said they or their foreman had received training on avoiding COVID.

In much of Oregon, the pandemic was not an isolated incident. Wildfires destroyed the homes of many farmworkers, often forcing them to temporarily live in close proximity to one another, even while they continued to work on the farms.

But for the most part, they and others were able to protect themselves and to harvest the crops that fed the nation.

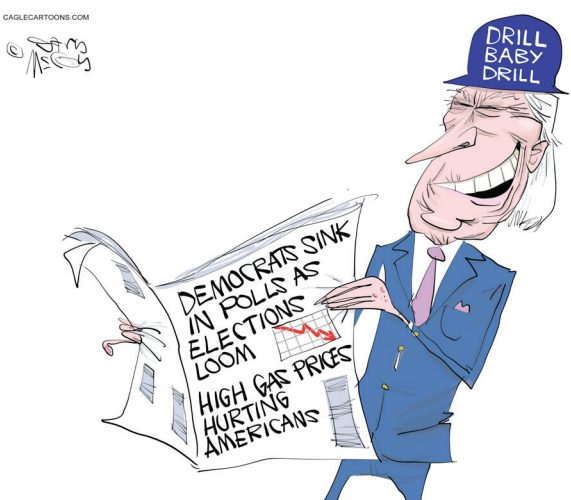
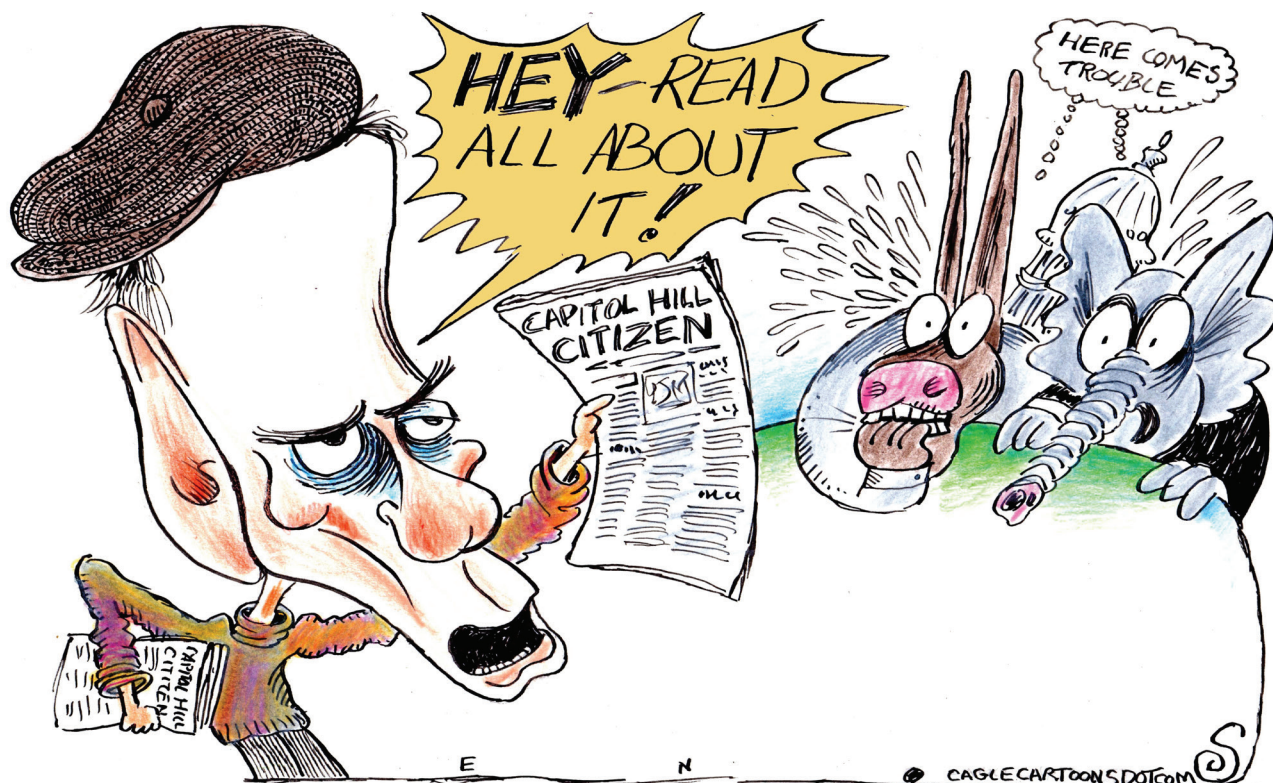
This should be a point of pride for them and the many others who overcame hardship during the past two years to keep the economy moving.

They also deserve a sincere "thank you" from all of us for jobs well done.

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## Oregon journalists are experimenting with new way to report on governor's race



**LES ZAITZ**  
OTHER VIEWS

Oregon voters, you're about to benefit from a novel effort to report on the governor's race.

Between the Republicans and the Democrats, more than two dozen candidates are on the primary ballot for governor.

Most news organizations don't have the reporters, the space or the time to report on them all.

Yet voters deserve to know something about them besides what they see in mailers, campaign ads and Voters' Pamphlets.

Journalists found a way to provide at least some useful information once ballots go out April 27. Soon, you can expect to start seeing news outfits large and small publish answers the candidates gave to common questions.

This media approach results from a determined effort to consult voters. Earlier this year, a series of listening sessions — "Let's Talk" — provided voters across the state a chance to talk to the media. Our job was to listen.

We wanted to know what voters would like to get from the press. Two vital "asks" emerged. One was that voters wanted the press to avoid picking winners based on volume and type of coverage. They didn't want Oregon journalists to just key in on those who could raise a lot of money. Let the voters decide who warrants consideration, they said.

The second "ask" was for more information about issues and topics that matter to Oregonians. Campaign contributions? Not much. Political scandals? Yawn.

From that emerged the idea of pulling together newsrooms in common cause to deliver more information that Oregonians want. We had to act fast.

We settled on this approach just

last month. Journalists around the state would first pick broad topics of importance to Oregon and its people. Then they would work to craft questions to be presented to every candidate, no matter how they were polling, regardless of how much money they had or had not raised.

In a matter of days, reporters and editors settled on the topics: climate change and the environment, crime and safety, education, economy and housing.

Questions under each topic flowed in from newsrooms all over the state. A corps of editors tackled the job of reducing the list to just three questions per topic and revising the questions for clarity and uniformity.

That work was undertaken by Joe Beach of Capital Press, Erik Neumann of Jefferson Public Radio in Ashland, Rachael McDonald of KLCC in Eugene, Danielle Jester of the Lake County Examiner in Lakeview, John Schrag of Pamplin Media Group, K. Rambo of Street Roots, Andrew Cutler of the East Oregonian in Pendleton and Dana Haynes of Portland Tribune. I joined in as well.

The Agora Journalism Center in Portland, part of the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication, kept the communications flowing and finally took on the task of getting the 15 questions out to all the candidates.

A sampling:  
• The Oregon governor's office is usually reactive when it comes to dealing with drought — sending relief money to affected counties or providing water deliveries in communities after wells have gone dry. What specific steps would you take to provide long-term solutions for years of increasing drought?

• Some rural counties with small populations and small tax bases struggle with adequate law enforcement funding. What steps would you take to address this chronic problem?

• Coming out of the pandemic, we are seeing unprecedented stress levels in educators, students and parents. As governor, what steps would you take to address this stress and keep our public K-12 schools from imploding?

Once candidates respond (they have until Friday, April 22), all the answers to each question will be placed together, question by question. They will be edited only for length for those who exceed the limit. (If you are backing a particular candidate, nudge them to respond.)

The state's largest news organizations, including The Oregonian and Oregon Public Broadcasting, elected not to participate. That's fine — they have far more resources than the rest of us.

But the lineup of media organizations that so far are partners in the project represent newsrooms large and small, from big cities to rural outposts. Pamplin Media Group has 26 newspapers all over the state, from Forest Grove to Prineville. EO Media Group is participating and has 15 newspapers from Astoria to Baker City. Other newsrooms include Jefferson Public Radio, KLCC, Lake County Examiner, Portland Record, Street Roots, Columbia Gorge News, Grants Pass Daily Courier, Keizertimes, KGW, Portland Monthly, Willamette Week, Malheur Enterprise, Salem Reporter, Seaside Signal, The Way by OR360, The Times-Journal and Yachats News.

Voters, I hope, will be eager to read the results. I know I am. There may be political gems out there that aren't obvious from campaign finance reports and headline counts. And if we succeed in getting more voters interested and engaged, then all those newsrooms have done their duty to provide the kind of public service so vital to our state.

■ Les Zaitz is a veteran editor and investigative reporter, serving Oregon for more than 45 years.

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