

OUR VIEW

# Governor will play key role in state wildfire response

From 1992-2001, about 199,000 acres in Oregon burned annually in wildfires. From 2002-2011, about 314,000 acres in Oregon burned annually in wildfires.

From 2012-2021, about 720,000 acres in Oregon burned annually in wildfires.

You could pick different breakpoints for the years. The story would not be much different.

Wildfire has been an increasing threat. It cost lives, homes, wildlife habitat, damage from smoke limiting outdoor activities and the costs of suppression.

The biggest recent response from the Oregon Legislature was the passage of Senate Bill 762 in 2021.

“We have done something remarkable,” state Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, said at the time, quoted by OPB. “By we, I mean scores of people who’ve been working collaboratively for years, up to and including last night, to create a wildfire program for Oregon that rises to the scale of this crisis.”

The bill was an accomplishment. But the more cautious comment on the bill at the time from state Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, was dead-on.

“This is not a one-and-done project. This is absolutely the furthest thing from a one-and-done,” Findley said. “If we don’t stay intimately involved, we’re going to spend \$190 million, and we’re not going to have any results when the smoke clears, if it clears.”

(Please note he says \$190 million in that quote but the spending in the bill is more like \$220 million.)

So has Senate Bill 762 worked? It’s still too early to tell.

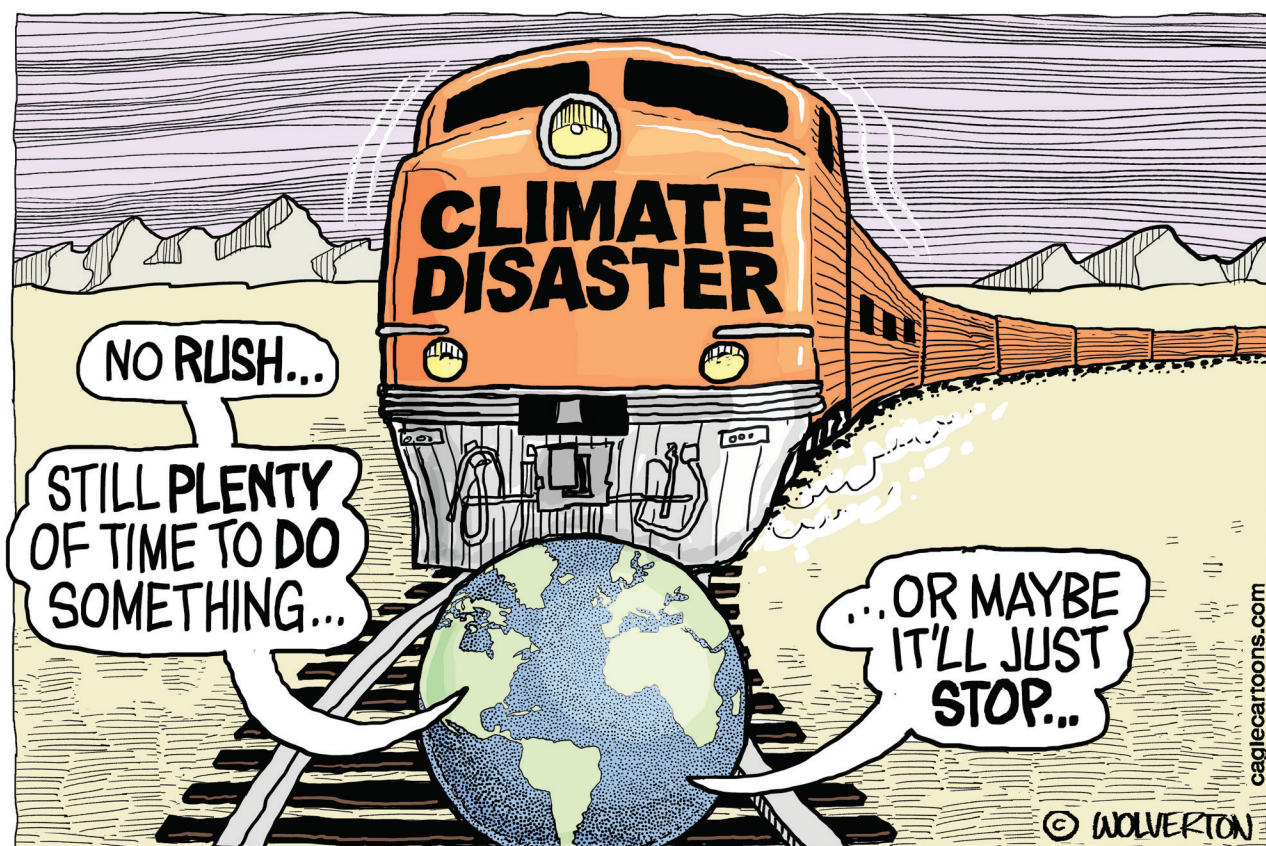
It’s really going to be up to Oregon’s next governor to follow through on the plans. That could be interesting. The part of the bill that was arguably the most contentious was wildfire mapping. But it’s one thing to rank areas in Oregon by wildfire risk. It is another thing to take that mapping and start telling people what to do on their land. And the state is considering rules for what people might be required to do on their land.

It could mean orders to clear brush and other vegetation. It could mean stricter rules for how homes can be built and what materials are used. Those may be sensible things to do. Some people will not appreciate it. One person’s excessive undergrowth can be another’s prized landscaping. Farmers are also worried what any new rules might mean for them.

There’s much more than mapping and regulations to the spending from the bill: wildfire detection cameras, working with utilities to reduce risk from power lines, suppression capacity, better smoke monitoring, grants for residential smoke filtration and the list goes on.

The good thing is baked into the bill are requirements for reports to the Legislature about the performance of the legislation and there are plans to recommend improvements.

All three candidates for Oregon governor — Democrat Tina Kotek, Republican Christine Drazan and probable independent candidate Betsy Johnson — voted for SB 762. We will be asking them how they will follow through on the legislation and what else Oregon might do.



# Sheriff’s contract with Elgin ends July 1



CODY BOWEN  
OTHER VIEWS

I would like to take a moment and answer some questions that have been presented lately in regards to the Union County Law Enforcement/City of Elgin contract.

The original contract to provide law enforcement services was reached with former Elgin council members and the former Elgin mayor approximately 10 years ago. This contract came about as a result of the dissolution of the former Elgin City Police Department.

As some of you may remember, the city faced many struggles with maintaining its own police department. Problems such as personnel, proper training, up-to-date equipment and funding plagued the department. Some of you may recall when the officers were tasked with enforcing city ordinances, the divide and frustration that arose. I mention these things because I believe when we forget our history or choose to ignore our history, we are bound to repeat it.

Recently, Mayor Risa Halgarth and some council members have chosen to end the contract with Union County Sheriff’s Office to pursue resurrecting their own police department. The idea of an Elgin Police Department was first brought to my attention over a year ago. At the end of the contract year 2020-21, the council told me they could not afford the annual increase to the contract that had been in place. I told the mayor and council I would freeze the contract price for the 2021 year with the idea this would give them another year to plan ahead and budget accordingly for the renewal in 2022.

In February 2022, I attended a council meeting with the intention of bringing to the table the renewal of the Elgin contract. Upon presentation of the new contract, the council advised me they still could not afford the price tag for the law enforcement services. I then adjusted the proposed contract considerably, removing any costs that I could in order to continue the services that Elgin is accustomed to. When I say services, I’m referring to the 420 hours of monthly coverage provided by three full-time deputies.

After the council had concluded all budget meetings, without including me on any of them, I returned to the council with the revised, less expensive proposal. At that time I was met with complaints

“Patrol services are an extra service that rely solely on available funding. When those services are deemed not necessary and funding is cut by council members and mayors, the only people to suffer are the citizens.”

— Cody Bowen, Union County Sheriff

about the service Elgin had been receiving. Complaints from Mayor Halgarth about illegal ATV use within the city and truck drivers violating a truck route. I advised that my office had received only two ATV complaints in the last two years and very few, if any, complaints about trucks.

Mayor Halgarth also stated that over the last few years they were not seeing an adequate amount of tickets being written for violations. I explained that we prefer to correct poor driving behaviors by education or verbal warnings and citations as a last result, if needed. Mayor Halgarth stated she would prefer citations to be issued as it is a good source of revenue and helps fund the budget. I told her I would not require mandatory ticket quotas and I would leave it up to my deputies’ discretion. Mayor Halgarth did not like that answer.

Mayor Halgarth expressed dissatisfaction when she learned that my deputies could not enforce city ordinances. I suggested they drop the city ordinances that they were concerned with and such violations would fall back on county ordinances that we could enforce. That idea was rejected because it would cut into alleged revenue.

After I presented a budget that was more than affordable, it was still countered by dissatisfaction from some council members and Mayor Halgarth. Which told me it was never about the money in the first place. I soon realized the excuse of “we can’t afford it” was possibly a hiding place for personal agendas.

What I have since discovered in recent weeks that I would like to bring to everyone’s attention: No matter how inexpensive the contract is, Mayor Halgarth and some council members will say they cannot afford it. Yet they are willing to spend twice as much to bring back their own police, that are under the direct control of the council and mayor. They have stated they have applied for grants to subsidize some of the costs. Assuming these grants are approved and received by the closing date of June 30, what happens when they expire? Will you — the taxpayer — be responsible for these additional costs?

I would like to apologize to the citizens of Elgin for the upcoming frustration you will most certainly encounter with the decision made by the Elgin City Council and Mayor Halgarth. As of July 1, 2022, the city of Elgin will no longer have dedicated patrol in the city limits from my deputies. What this means is that any call for help will fall on the shoulders and be the sole responsibility of the newly formed Elgin Police Department and its staff.

If Elgin would like to develop a memorandum of understanding for cover units or assistance, they have yet to reach out to me. Please understand that by them canceling the Elgin contract, I have been forced to terminate three full-time patrol positions that were dedicated to Elgin. With limited staffing I have directed my deputies to focus on areas that do not have municipal policing available. Towns such as Cove, Imbler, North Powder, Summerville, Starkey, Perry, Medical Springs and the surrounding areas within Union County. We will still provide the same amount of coverage to cities such as Island City and Union who have chosen to contract for additional services.

Please understand by Oregon law my responsibilities as sheriff are to provide jail services, civil services and search and rescue. Patrol services are an extra service that rely solely on available funding. When those services are deemed not necessary and funding is cut by council members and mayors, the only people to suffer are the citizens.

No matter what misinformation has been circulated by the Elgin City Council, understand that the Union County Sheriff’s Office will no longer provide a law enforcement presence and will no longer respond to calls for service within the city limits of Elgin as of July 1.

When this attempt at local governmental control fails like it did in the past, I will be ready and willing to establish another contract to give you, the citizens of Elgin, the professional, transparent service you have been accustomed to for the last several years.

■ Cody Bowen is the sheriff of Union County.

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