

OUR VIEW

Lawsuit is a failure on both sides

A recent move by a coalition of conservation groups to file a lawsuit to topple a decision made by the Trump administration that negated a rule that banned logging of large trees on national forests east of the Cascades is ultimately a sad reminder that little progress has been made regarding nonlegal solutions to environmental challenges.

At the heart of the issue is what is known as the 21-inch rule — an edict that restricted logging of live trees larger than 21 inches in diameter measured four and half feet off the ground — that dates back to the mid-1990s.

The rule was created to address concerns from environmental groups about the safety and viability of old growth timber in national forests across our region.

The environmental groups assert the Trump administration's move to lift the ban violates federal law — specifically the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Forest Management Act — and officials should have crafted an environmental impact statement to review the impacts of a decision to lift the ban.

Proponents of lifting the ban contend abolishing the rule gives agencies such as the Forest Service more flexibility in its effort to manage forests to diminish wildfire risk.

The suit — filed in the U.S. District Court in Pendleton — is yet another example of failure for both the conservationists and the U.S. Government.

Most — but not all — environmental lawsuits over flashpoint issues should never end up in a courtroom. That's because both sides of any such issue not only carry the capacity to work these challenges out but also hold a responsibility to do so.

That responsibility isn't to a long-held belief in a specific dogma or blind obedience to a new edict delivered in the waning days of an administration.

No, the responsibility should be to those who live and work and play in areas such as Eastern Oregon. The voters of our region deserve better than yet another long legal battle that consumes time and money.

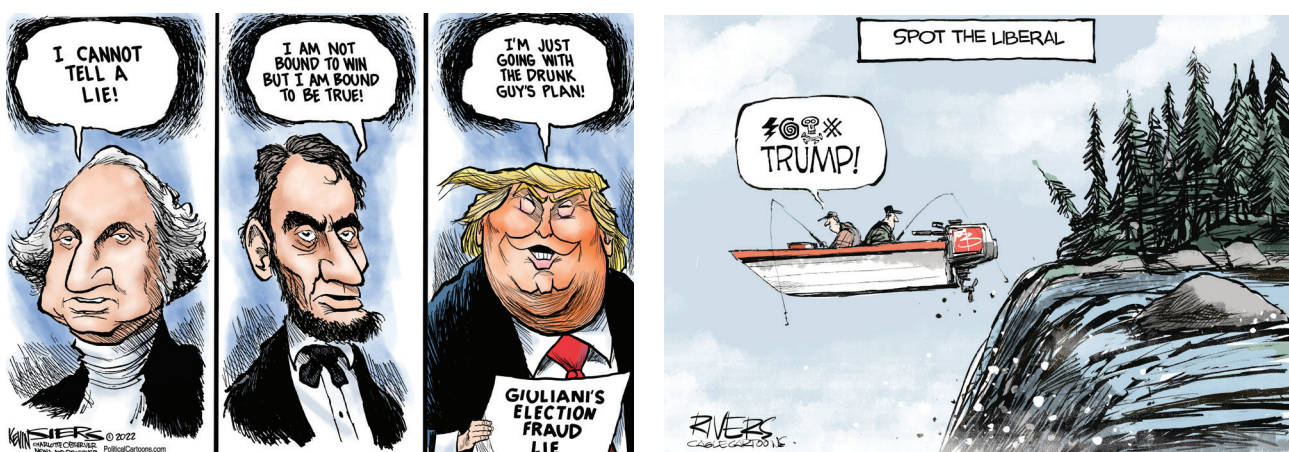
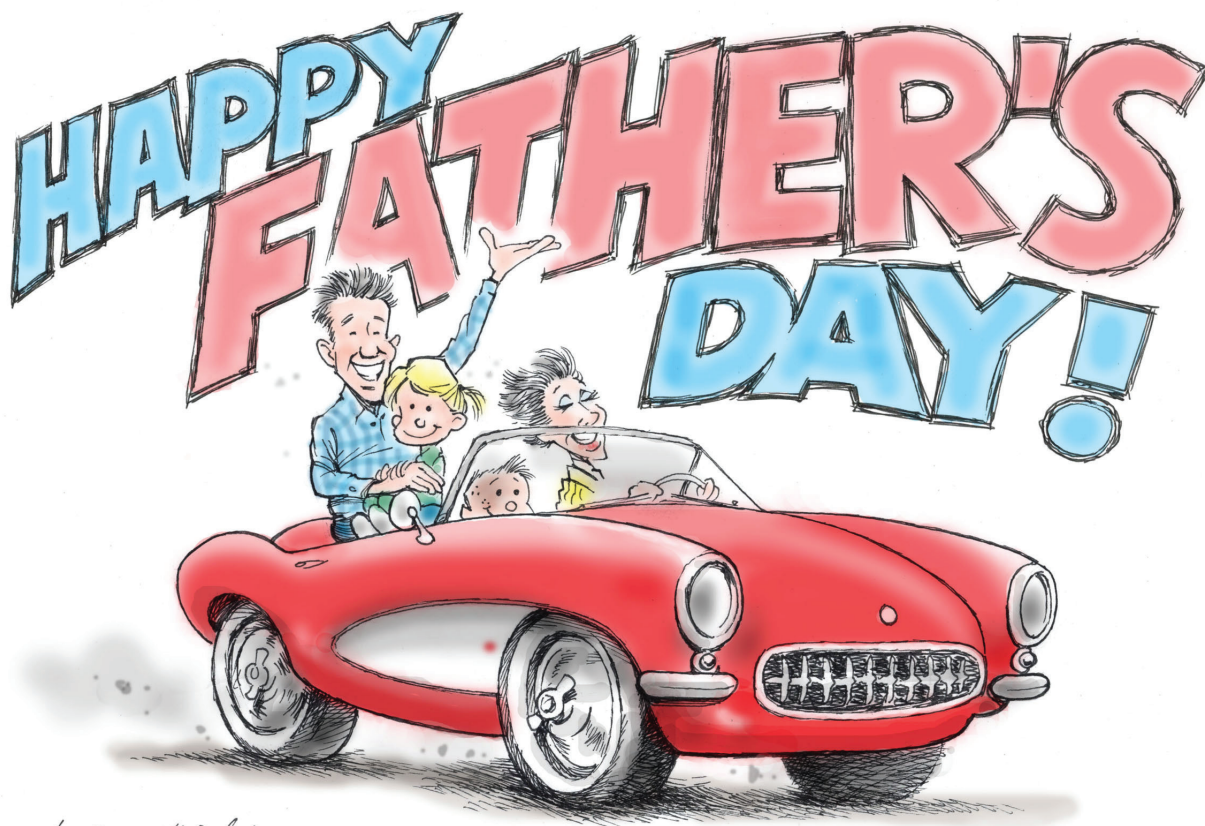
Opposing sides of any issue can sit down and work out a compromise. There is no better example of such a circumstance than the effort spearheaded by U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden regarding the Owyhee Canyonlands in Southeastern Oregon. There, for years, environmentalists, ranchers and others squared off on how best to preserve pristine canyonland. In the end, Wyden led the effort to work out a compromise between the two groups. Was everyone satisfied? No. Did everyone get what they wanted? No. Yet that's how democracy is supposed to work. Compromise and the goal of working toward a viable solution should be the focus, not going to court.

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The time to support local news is now



DEAN RIDDINGS
OTHER VIEWS

Congress has an opportunity to pass legislation that benefits all local citizens, businesses and even protects our democracy. The Local Journalism Sustainability Act, LJSA for short, should be included as part of any upcoming reconciliation bill that Congress is considering.

The LJSA is a well-thought-out bill that would provide needed support to local news organizations, including local newspapers, to ensure their viability as they continue to make progress toward a digital future.

Many members of Congress have seen what happens when a newspaper closes in their district, and they see the impact it has on the community. That is why many of our leaders, including Sens. Cantwell, Schumer, Manchin, Wyden and others, have stepped up in support of the LJSA.

And while others in Congress may not have signed on as co-sponsors of the bill yet, many recognize the importance and the need to maintain strong local news organizations in their communities.

To understand what the LJSA is, it is important to understand what it is not. This is a temporary measure to help newspapers at this critical time, and it sunsets after five years.

The LJSA won't help national news organizations, but it will support local news organizations and help them invest in their newsrooms in order to continue to cover the issues that impact local cities and towns. The result is a bill that provides a bridge for local newspapers as they continue to evolve their business models.

So why is it so critical for Congress to pass the LJSA now? Quite simply, the future of local newspapers in many areas of the country hangs in the balance.

In the past 15 years, more than a quarter of all newspapers have disappeared, and many more have been forced to make staff reductions that have diminished the coverage of topics that impact local citizens. The way people get their information and advertise their local businesses is quickly moving to digital, and local newspapers continue to be impacted by the Big Tech companies that use their original content without fair compensation.

To make matters worse, newspapers, like many other industries, were financially impacted by the pandemic, even though the coverage provided by local newspapers was more vital than ever.

The current economic challenges have only hastened the need for Congress to act on the LJSA quickly. As inflation is impacting everyone, it has made the environment for local newspapers even more challenging. The cost of

retaining employees has gone up. The cost of newsprint has increased 30% over last year, and the cost of gas used to deliver the newspaper is up more than 50% in the past two years. Many newspaper carriers drive hundreds and even thousands of miles each week. These increases have driven many local newspapers closer to making further reductions or even ceasing operations.

Who wins with the passage of the Local Journalism Sustainability Act? Clearly, local newspapers win by obtaining the support needed to continue their investments in reporting on local news. But the real winners are the communities that keep their local newspaper.

From watching the actions of local government, reporting on the state of local schools, tracking local health trends or providing the latest restaurant reviews and sales information, local newspapers keep a community connected and informed.

We encourage everyone to reach out to their representatives in Congress and ask them to support local journalism. Whether it is inclusion of the LJSA in the budget reconciliation bill or a standalone bill, the time for action is now. It's a rare opportunity for government to act on something that benefits us all.

■ Dean Riddings is CEO of America's Newspapers, an association committed to explaining, defending and advancing the vital role of newspapers in democracy and civil life.

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