

OUR VIEW

Develop better plan for managing public forests

The folks at the Oregon Department of Forestry have retracted their new multi-million-dollar map identifying 80,000 privately owned parcels of land that are at high risk of burning up during a wildfire. The map was dropped in the laps of landowners with little or no consultation about what it may mean in the way of higher insurance rates and other impacts.

The map apparently skipped over the fact that the primary threat to privately owned forests and other land in Oregon is poorly managed publicly owned forests. Some 64% of forestland in Oregon is owned by the state and federal governments. It's on them to make sure those areas are managed in a way that minimizes the threat of wildfire.

Many wildfires start on public forests and grasslands, which have been allowed to build up fuel over the decades. When lightning strikes, or a campfire gets out of control, these tinder boxes take off. If wind is present — and it often is — the fires are driven onto private forests and other properties, even farmland.

Poorly designed and maintained power lines are particularly susceptible to wind. When those lines slap together, even more fires can be started.

Even the best-managed private property can be burned if the state and federal government and the power companies aren't doing an adequate job of maintaining their land and facilities.

Ask the folks who were burned out of house and home in the Santiam Canyon or the many other areas that have been torched by wildfires in recent years.

Most private land is well-managed. It has to be, because the owners depend on it for their livelihoods and lifestyles. They care.

It's the publicly owned land that has been the problem for decades. It was unmanaged, or poorly managed, on the theory that it was in some way sacrosanct and that logging was bad and doing nothing was good.

Only now — after some of the worst wildfire disasters in state history — are managers getting the message that they have to step up and do a better job.

Though "treating" and prescriptive burning of forests is a start, an overall game plan that would plot defensive areas and strategies that help firefighters stop or control wildfires is also desperately needed.

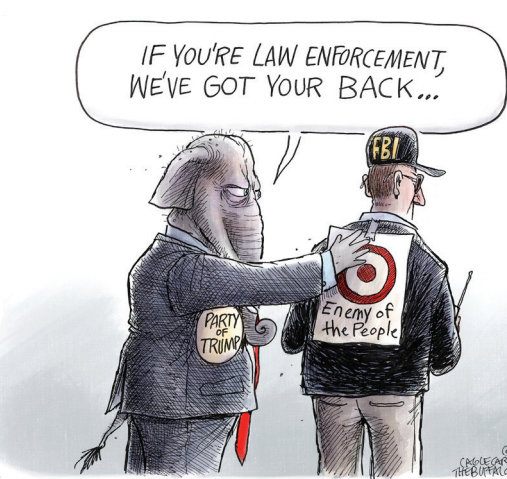
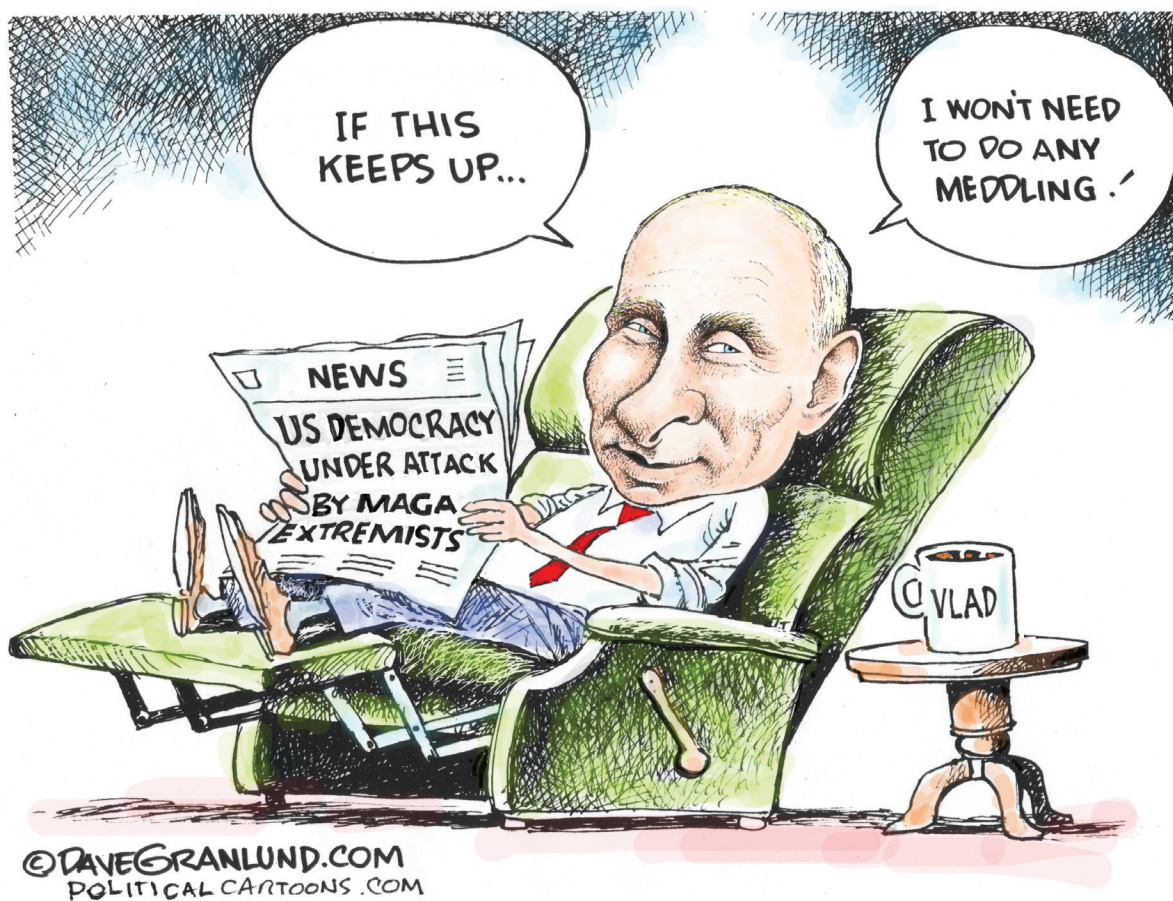
The state and federal governments need to come up with another map and identify the public forest land most in need of thinning, treatment, prescriptive burning, fire breaks or logging and get to work.

And yes, they need to protect those precious birds and other critters listed under the Endangered Species Act. But they also have to recognize that leaving vast swaths of habitat unmanaged and vulnerable to massive wildfires leaves those species in danger of incineration.

Ironically, some environmental groups are also to blame for blocking or delaying treatment and logging projects by running to court. They believe they are doing the protected species and the forests a favor by backseat driving forest and wildlife management.

A word about climate change. The Capital Press has been reporting on climate change for nearly two decades. This is not something that just happened when politicians discovered it among their talking points. It is happening and scientists continue to study it to gain a better understanding of it. It should also be noted that the climate has always changed, only the pace of change is different.

Politicians at the state and federal level seem to get hung up on long-term solutions that will slow climate change over decades or longer. In the meantime, they have to deal with the here and now of climate change by better managing public forests and grasslands to make sure they do not burn — and take private property, forests and grasslands with them.



How does the National Weather Service define a heat wave?



The heat wave from July 25 through Aug. 1 provided yet another round of record-breaking temperatures for Eastern Oregon, with La Grande seeing multiple days of new daily record high temperatures set.

In fact, La Grande matched recorded new daily records on July 30 and Aug. 1, recording a high of 105 degrees each day to set new high water marks. While this heat wave wasn't quite as severe as the historical one during June of last year, such events are a sobering reminder of what a future climate may hold for Eastern Oregon. Both NOAA and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change anticipate that heat waves will become more frequent and severe with a warming climate.

But what exactly is a heat wave? The criteria for determining a heat wave changes depending on the context, but is generally considered to be a period of excessive heat that lasts multiple days. Here at the National Weather Service, we're interested in advising the public about the heat when we anticipate adverse impacts to health due to abnormally high temperatures.

At what point that exactly is will depend heavily on the geographic region of interest. In the

eastern United States, humidity plays a large role in the heat, and the Heat Index is often utilized when defining a heat wave. The Heat Index factors in humidity's effect on temperatures and human health, but out here in the West, where the air is much drier, the Heat Index is often similar to or even less than the actual temperature.

As a result, the NWS offices of the western United States use a prototype product called HeatRisk (www.wrh.noaa.gov/wrh/heatrisk/?wfo=pdf), which is designed to put a period of hot temperatures into a climatological context. The main advantage of HeatRisk is that it takes a multitude of factors into consideration, outside of just how hot temperatures may reach during the peak of expected heat.

Factors such as the overnight low temperatures, time of year, duration of the heat and thresholds of health-related impacts from the heat based on CDC data are all utilized in tandem with the forecasted high temperature. All of these serve as inputs into the HeatRisk calculation, which determines a category score from 0 to 4, similar to the UV Index or the Air Quality Index. A 0 category denotes no heat impacts expected and 4 suggests the entire population is likely at risk for heat-related impacts, not just the more heat-sensitive members of the public such as the elderly.

The National Weather Service may issue either a Heat Advisory

or an Excessive Heat Warning based on the HeatRisk. In simple terms, a warning is more severe than an advisory both when it comes to the magnitude and duration of the extreme heat, with temperature records more often at risk under a Warning. But HeatRisk is just one of many tools NWS forecasters utilize when advising the public about the potential of a heat wave.

Out here, east of the Cascade mountains, where the public is a bit better equipped to handle long spells of heat than our neighbors on the west side, the character of the heat and the time of year is also assessed. This is done in part to be sure heat events are assessed on a case-by-case basis and to ensure more severe events are addressed thoroughly.

For metro areas such as Portland and Seattle, however, where many homes lack air conditioning, even marginal events may require an elevated notice in order to better advise the public, at-risk populations, and emergency responders on the potential for a heat wave.

Regardless, HeatRisk offers the National Weather Service and its core partners a simplified tool to communicate the potential impacts a heat wave may pose on the public.

Cole Evans is a meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Pendleton. Evans joined the weather service in 2020 and serves as a focal point in aviation weather and performance assessment in the office.

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Phone: 541-963-3161

Toll free (Oregon): 1-800-781-3214

Email: news@lagrandeobserver.com

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STAFF

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