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Opinion

Editorial Board

Editor & Publisher
Joe Beach

Managing Editor
Carl Sampson

opinions@capitalpress.com Online: www.capitalpress.com/opinion

OUR VIEW

The curse of the Yellow Dragon



The villain is huanglongbing — Chinese for “yellow dragon disease.” Discovered nearly 100 years ago in China, the disease has been decimating the citrus industry around the globe.

The hunt has all the makings of a Sherlock Holmes detective story, complete with an exotic villain and a victim desperately in need of rescue.

At risk is U.S. citrus fruit production, worth \$3.4 billion a year.

Florida’s citrus production alone is worth \$1 billion, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service. As a whole, Florida’s entire citrus industry, including growers, processors and packers, generates \$9 billion a year.

But something has been killing citrus trees in Florida. The number of orange trees has dropped 25 percent, from 80 million to 60 million, in the past nine years.

The number of grapefruit trees has dropped 64 percent, from 14 million to 5 million, according to USDA. Only a few years ago, Florida had nearly 1 million acres of citrus groves. Today, it has less than half that, 410,700 acres.

The villain is huanglongbing — Chinese for “yellow dragon disease.” Discovered nearly 100 years ago in China, the disease has been decimating the citrus industry around the globe. Since its discovery, the bacterial disease has killed more than 100 million citrus trees in 40 countries. Yellow dragon disease is also known as citrus greening and by the initials HLB.

There exists no cure for yellow dragon disease. It is spread by the Asian citrus psyllid, a tiny insect that sucks the sap of an infected tree and infects the next tree it visits. Yellow dragon disease first causes the leaves to turn yellow. Then the fruit turns greenish yellow and becomes unmarketable. Finally, within a few years, the tree dies.

Scientific detectives are using high-tech tools to gain an understanding of the yellow dragon and the psyllids that have spread it to 15 states or U.S. territories, including Florida and California, the nation’s largest citrus fruit producers.

At the University of Florida, Clemson University, Texas A&M University and the USDA Agricultural Research Service, scientists are undertaking a computerized search for varieties of citrus trees most resistant to the disease. They hope to use the information to breed varieties of trees resistant to

yellow dragon disease.

This narrative will sound familiar to hazelnut growers in Oregon. Eastern filbert blight took hold in the hazelnut trees of Oregon’s Willamette Valley in the mid-1980s. The fungal disease spread through the valley despite farmers’ efforts to control it using fungicides and by pruning and removing infected trees.

Shawn Mehlenbacher, a Oregon State University hazelnut breeder, led the successful effort to study hazelnut trees from around the world and develop new varieties that are resistant to EFB.

His is one of the great success stories of OSU agricultural research.

“Without the Oregon Agricultural Experiment Station the hazelnut industry would disappear,” he said in a 2014 university video. “But because we have new resistant varieties it is expanding, not disappearing.”

Oregon’s hazelnut industry, which produces 99 percent of the nation’s crop, continues to expand. Today, Oregon farmers grow hazelnuts on 37,000 acres — and plant more EFB-resistant trees each year.

This success — the ability of scientific research to overcome a seemingly insurmountable problem — should be encouraging to citrus growers in Florida, California and elsewhere.

With adequate resources — hundreds of millions of dollars have already been funneled into research from the industry and the state and federal governments — scientists will be able to breed citrus trees resistant to huanglongbing. They will slay the yellow dragon forever.



File Photo
An orange infected with huanglongbing — yellow dragon disease.

Readers' views

Purpose of forest management changes

Growing up in Cascade Locks, Ore., in the 1940s I would listen with awe to the many stories about wildfires told by my family and older friends. Stories of fire jumping the Columbia, people covering their shingle roofs with burlap soaked with water to protect their homes from cinders, people riding logging trains out of the mountains while trestles were on fire, etc.

Scary stuff. But, they made me believe that fire prevention was very important.

In the 1950s and 1960s I spent summers working for the Forest Service. Fire prevention was the No. 1 priority for the Columbia Gorge Ranger District and everything we did was done with the understanding we were doing this to better protect our forests.

We opened trails that had not been worked since the CCC boys left at the beginning of World War II. We opened and built roads to provide quicker access for fire suppression and for potential fire breaks. In the Bull Run watershed small pockets of old dying trees were clear cut to reduce the potential for lightning-caused fires. These small managed clear cuts were done to mimic the ideal forest environment one would hope for in the event of a fire.

The roads to these clear

cuts were planned to provide for fire protection with their construction being done by the logging companies. Funds from the sale of the logs would go into the federal coffers to be distributed back to the counties, schools, roads, etc. Everything was done to prevent mega fires.

This appeared to me to be a win-win deal. Fire hazard trees were being removed, roads were being constructed for quick access and funding was being provided for necessary services.

Then the emphasis began to shift. Trails were for recreation, clear cuts were ugly, fire could be beautiful if you would just wait a hundred years, companies were believed to be making money off our trees, lawsuits were filed, roads needed to be destroyed to limit access. We needed to bring the forest back to its prehistoric state. All of this was happening with the population increasing and our climate changing.

Now we are paying the price for this shortsightedness and lack of common sense. We have to decide for whom we are managing these forests. The native population at one time may have burned the forests periodically. Their management objectives were different from what our objective should be. We need to be thinking about 100 years or more from now as well as today.

Carlisle Harrison
Hermiston, Ore.

Letters policy

Write to us: Capital Press welcomes letters to the editor on issues of interest to farmers, ranchers and the agribusiness community.

Letters policy: Please limit letters to 300 words and include your home address and a daytime telephone number with your submission. Longer pieces, 500-750 words, may be considered as guest commentary pieces for use on the opinion pages. Guest commentary submissions should also include a photograph of the author.

Send letters via email to opinions@capitalpress.com. Emailed letters are preferred and require less time to process, which could result in quicker publication. Letters also may be sent to P.O. Box 2048, Salem, OR 97308; or by fax to 503-370-4383.

Plan reduced NW forest management

Regarding your opinion on managing forests, which was excellent, a correction needs to be made that it was President Clinton and Vice President Gore that led and created the “NW Plan” that reduced forest management by 85 percent in California, Oregon and Washington.

Subsequent presidents did nothing to alter that fact while every single year throughout only the Northwest, approximately 4 billion to 5 billion board-foot of growth continued to add fuels for eventual fires — fires that we are now experiencing.

Yes, national parks and monuments are burning, too, but that is expected

where “preservation policies are followed by law.”

That is not the case on our national forests and lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, yet the NW Plan so restricted management under the premise “it was to protect the spotted owl” that fires are now burning those habitats by the thousands of acres.

We need to manage our federal forests on a landscape or watershed scale by treatments that alter continuous fuel patterns and provide improved wildlife habitat! It can easily be done with congressional action.

By the way, I am a former forest supervisor, including two decades of fire-fighting plus National Fire Team experience.

Ted Stubblefield
Ridgefield, Wash.

Obama not to blame for forest management

A recent editorial about federal land management and fires covers a topic that is close to my heart — the use of active forest management to better set up our national wildlands for the inevitable wildfires. I was happy to see that you got much of it right, especially with respect to the need to place thinning treatments in strategic places in order to better manage fires.

However (and this is critically important) the editorial took an irresponsible turn when you chose to lay the blame on the Obama administration. Your statement, (“(A)t some point the Obama administration decided nearly all federal forests were off-limits to logging, the best and only way to manage forests”) is flat out wrong and unnecessarily divisive. Does every issue have to be viewed through the lens of partisan politics?

Here are the facts: According to the Oregon Department of Forestry, federal annual timber harvest levels in our state were actually higher during the Obama administration than during the G.W. Bush administration (503.75 billion board feet harvested per year 2009-2016 vs. 324 billion board feet per year 2001-2008). Interestingly, the harvest level per year

during the Clinton administration was even higher (665 billion board feet/year 1993-2000). I see absolutely no evidence that any particular administration “decided that federal forests were off-limits to logging” as you have so boldly stated — let alone the Obama administration.

In my beloved Blue Mountains National Forests, harvest levels have also risen over the past 8 years, due in part to the collaborative approaches to forest management that were encouraged (and funded) by the past administration.

If you want to blame federal laws for our current situation, it is popular to blame the National Environmental Policy Act, the Wilderness Act, and the Endangered Species Act. Be aware that these laws were passed (by Congress) and signed (by the president) in the 1960’s and 1970’s — under the Johnson and Nixon administrations.

There is enough partisan politics being played in our country right now, and to further polarize the public in the west by falsely laying blame for the 2017 fire season on the Obama administration only makes it worse. I would expect the opinions of the editorial board to be based on real facts, not “alternative facts” or partisan hyperbole. I can get enough of that by reading letters to the editor and social media.

W.C. (Bill) Aney
Pendleton Ore.