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Opinion

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OUR VIEW

Growers depend on researchers to solve problems

Wallace Stanley Sayre, a political scientist and Columbia University professor, in the 1950s quipped that university politics are so intense because the stakes are so low.

Faculty and administrators involved in a kerfuffle at Washington State University’s College of Agricultural, Human and Natural Resource Sciences might disagree.

At stake, at least some faculty say, is academic freedom.

The WSU chapter of the American Association of University Professors says that 30 ag school faculty members claim commodity commissions exercise an outsize influence over research. They fear failing to meet objectives or getting crosswise

with commodity groups can lead administrators to withhold tenure or take other adverse career actions.

Administrators deny they or the faculty members are under the thumb of commodity groups funding research.

We’ve seen scant evidence that commodity commissions are overtly pressing administrators to take action against specific researchers. The researchers we spoke with seemed more upset with administrators.

Whether administrators, on their own initiative, are telegraphing any perceived concerns is a different matter. Some researchers say administrators don’t want to lose funding so they do the industry’s



Jim McFerson

bidding. Administrators say that’s not the case.

Under no circumstances should commodity groups paying

for research, or others lending financial support to a university, have sway over tenure or other personnel matters.

Neither should anyone expect specific outcomes. A lot of good ideas just don’t pan out.

Also clear, we think, is the question of how much input those funding research should have in how research is conducted or what the goal of that research should be.

In a perfect world, there would be money for scientists to study whatever they wanted, however they wanted. But the world is a long way from being perfect.

Growers put up money to solve specific problems — to counter pests, breed better performing varieties, develop new production techniques. Knowledge for the

sake of knowledge is a worthy ideal, but growers can really only fund those projects that serve their own interests.

In cooperation with the experts who perform the research, we think growers have the right to set expectations.

“The bottom line is, scientists can choose not to apply (or) choose to apply for funding, and if you’re funded to do a project, those are the objectives,” Jim McFerson, the director of WSU’s Tree Fruit Research and Extension Center in Wenatchee and a former Tree Fruit Research Commission manager, said. “If you’re not making progress, funding doesn’t happen by magic.”

The one who pays the fiddler calls the tune.

OUR VIEW

Sage grouse study deserves support

News of researchers studying the impact cattle might have on the greater sage grouse has drawn sharp criticism from some in the scientific community, who wonder whether the effort is worthwhile.

The sage grouse, a wild bird the size of a chicken, has been at the center of a decades-long debate across the West. Two years ago, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found the bird was “relatively abundant and well-distributed across the species’ 173 million-acre range,” which includes 11 states and two Canadian provinces.

As such, it would not need protection under the federal Endangered Species Act, as ranchers and others worked together to change how they grazed livestock.

The agency credited an “unprecedented conservation partnership” among ranchers for significantly reducing threats to the bird on 90 percent of its breeding habitat.

This, of course, was welcome news.

However, there is more to learn about any impact livestock may have on the birds and how they both might be better managed. That’s among the

goals of a study led by University of Idaho professor Courtney Conway, who also serves as director of the U.S. Geological Survey Idaho Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, which is a partnership of UI, the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

The researchers hope to learn how cattle and sage grouse might be able to co-exist. That’s what a recent article in the Capital Press says.

Four years into the 10-year study, one of the researchers said there appear to be no “big red flags” regarding the compatibility of sage grouse and cattle.

That and other aspects of the article have evoked criticism of the study. The critics’ premise is apparently “we already know what the outcome will be, so why do it?” They also picked at the headline, over which the researchers had zero control.

We believe more research is

needed, on this and every other scientific topic.

Through history, scientists have declared as settled a wide variety of “facts” that, upon further study, turned out to be wrong.

In the 16th century, astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus proposed that the earth orbited the sun instead of the earth residing at the center of the universe.

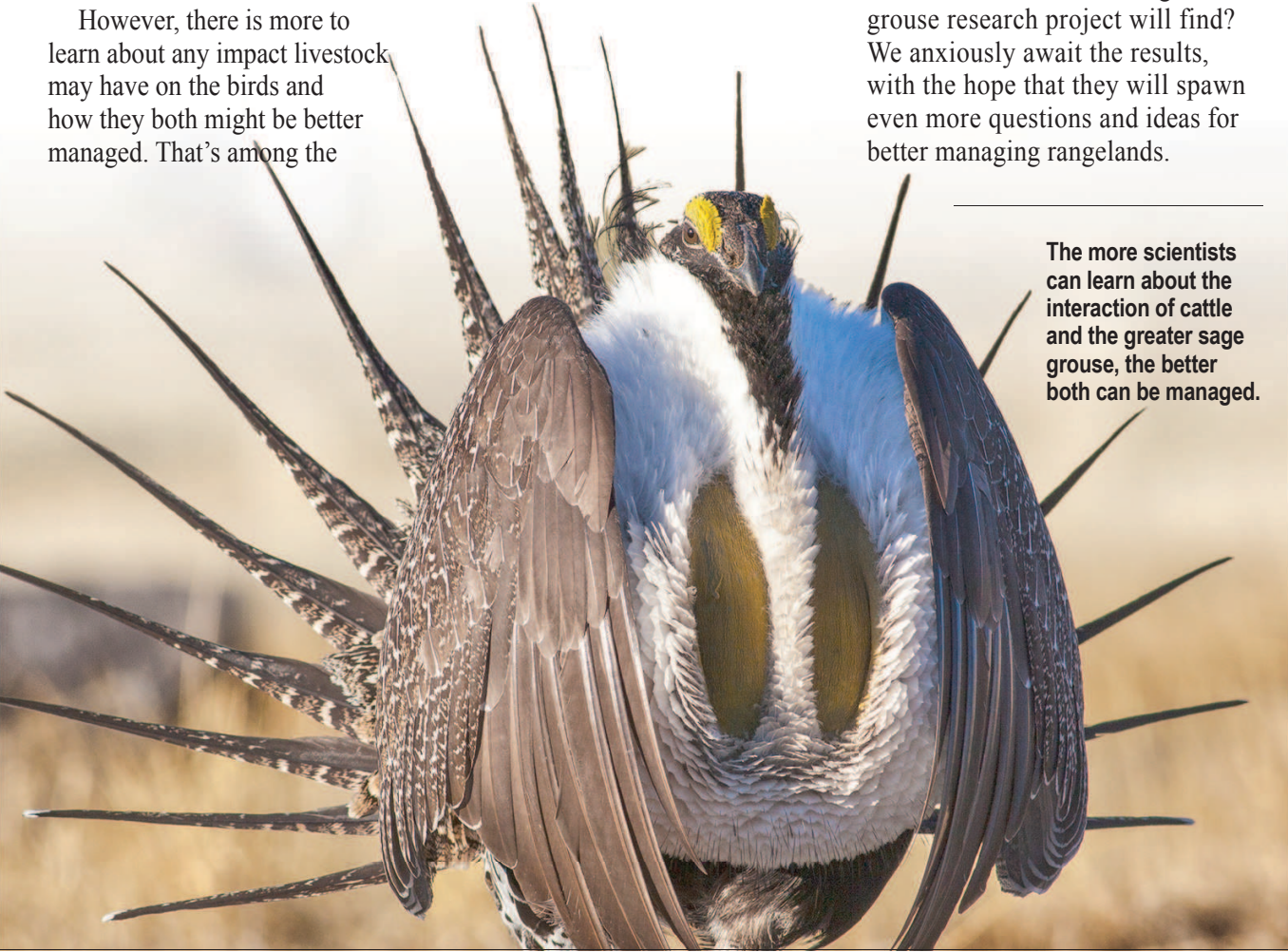
He was correct, but it took many years before his theory was fully accepted.

As recently as the 1980s scientists believed that one gene controlled a single trait in a human. Once the human genome was mapped, every trait could be controlled, according to this theory.

But they were wrong. Now that the genome has been mapped, scientists have discovered that a single trait is influenced by many factors.

The lesson: In science, as in life, everything is often much more complicated than it might seem at first.

Who knows what the sage grouse research project will find? We anxiously await the results, with the hope that they will spawn even more questions and ideas for better managing rangelands.



The more scientists can learn about the interaction of cattle and the greater sage grouse, the better both can be managed.

Readers’ views

Renewable Fuel Standard should be retained

Oregon is known for its green forests, clear water and clean air and we must protect these treasures for our use, and for future generations. Despite this, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recently suggested changing the Re-

newable Fuel Standard (RFS) to lower biofuel production targets, harming the future of biofuel innovation and the United States’ growth in the biofuel industry.

Currently, biofuels help our environment by reducing carbon emissions by up to 43 percent, and this number will only increase through further innovation. However, this requires the government to encourage

growth in the biofuel industry rather than squandering it.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) reported that, by 2022, biofuels will make up 93 percent of all renewable energy used in road travel. And, as oil gets dirtier and dirtier, biofuels can become cleaner. However, this necessary innovation can only occur if U.S. fuel producers are encouraged to do so. One

of the main drivers of biofuel growth is a strong RFS.

Oregonians, and all Americans, rely on the ethanol industry to support the agriculture economy and reduce fossil fuel usage. I urge our Oregon elected officials and Administrator Pruitt to commit to rural economy growth and a cleaner America.

Kevin Gleim
Salem, Ore.

Monarch habitat restoration benefits farmers, environment

By ROBERT GIBLIN
For the Capital Press

Guest
comment
Robert Giblin



Looking like small, flying black, orange and yellow stained-glass windows, monarch butterflies are prized for their beauty, and as a symbol of biodiversity and the need to protect ecosystems.

Because of a variety of challenges, however, monarch butterfly populations have declined. Collaboration among farmers, homeowners and other landowners will be crucial in helping to restore populations of monarchs and other pollinators.

There are many complex reasons for monarch population declines, including loss of breeding habitat, weather and climate change, predators, pathogens and parasites, and less overwintering habitat in Mexico.

Monarchs need places to eat, live and reproduce during their yearly journey from Mexico, to as far north as Canada.

To survive the migration, they need two kinds of nourishment — nectar and milkweed. Monarchs consume nectar from a variety of flowers, while milkweed provides shelter for the butterflies’ eggs and nourishment for their caterpillars.

Re-establishing milkweed is essential to restoring the population of monarchs, but it has long been considered a nuisance for farmers and gardeners alike.

Milkweed can be devastating to crop yields and may be toxic to some livestock if ingested. Gardeners often treat the plant like an invasive species.

For years, milkweed was classified as a noxious weed in some areas and its control was required by local or county laws.

In response to a 2014 petition to list the monarch under the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has begun the process of evaluating monarch conservation measures, including evaluating volunteer habitat conservation efforts in agriculture, to assess the impact toward ensuring long-term recovery and resilient monarch populations.

Farmers, ranchers and other landowners already are engaged in conservation initiatives focused on water quality, erosion control, wildlife and pollinator habitat.

These efforts demonstrate that continuing innovation in agricultural practices can reduce environmental impacts, increase crop productivity and be compatible with monarch conservation efforts.

Farmers need to main-

tain good cropland, but they are in a great position to help restore monarch habitat. The time to act is now. Farmers and other land managers should begin establishing or expanding monarch habitat in the fall of 2017 and spring of 2018. Milkweed can be established in many niches on the agricultural landscape, including conservation lands, grazing lands, rights-of-way, field margins and yard and garden areas. In some cases, solutions may be as simple as adjusting mowing or weed control practices to avoid time periods when monarch eggs and caterpillars are present.

Other land expanses, such as road and utility corridors or rights-of-way, also may be suitable for monarch habitat.

Many states and organizations offer information and volunteer registries for farmers and other landowners to enroll pollinator habitats and to share best management practices that will allow monarch habitat to survive.

Along the monarch flyway, state wildlife agencies have been tasked to develop management plans that encourage conservation plans in ways that make sense locally or regionally. These state and local efforts should include input from farm organizations and agribusinesses, which are uniquely positioned to support management practices that will result in sustainable monarch populations.

Federal government agencies, such as the Agriculture Department, FWS and the National Resources Conservation Service also are cooperating to align programs and rules to foster monarch habitat restoration.

The Farm Service Agency has enrolled more than 124,000 acres in the Conservation Reserve Program pollinator practice. FSA and NRCS are providing grants and incentives to implement practices to encourage establishment of pollinator habitat.

Monarchs face many challenges on their long migratory journey.

Agriculture can play a key role in helping these important pollinators reach their destination, but farmers can’t do it alone. Nor should they have to.

Robert Giblin is a freelance writer, speaker and consultant on agriculture and food issues and policies. This column appears courtesy of the American Farm Bureau Federation.