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Opinion

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Our View

Making Idaho's initiative process more fair

We have long been skeptical of the initiative processes in California and the Pacific Northwest. Most initiatives are proof that even good concepts can make bad laws.

Oregon initiatives, for example, have tinkered with laws governing marijuana and hard drugs — even property taxes. Each initiative has been fraught with unintended consequences.

Because initiatives do not get a thorough vetting through committee hearings and public testimony, voters need to be extra wary of what they are putting into statute or adding to the state constitution.

Idaho has an even bigger worry. Most of the state's population is congregated around a few cities. Boise is the largest metropolitan area by far.



EO Media Group File/East Oregonian

Idaho's legislature is considering a bill that would make the initiative process more fair.

The current law states that an initiative must get signatures from 6% of the registered voters in 18 legislative districts.

The problem: That can be accomplished by collecting signatures in the four most populous counties — Ada, Canyon, Kootenai and Bonne-

ville. The other 40 counties wouldn't matter.

In theory, this means an initiative can get on the ballot without a single signature from elsewhere in the state.

Talk about an urban-rural divide. If the urban areas can drive the initiative process — and presumably, pass

them — how can the many less-populated areas of the state have a meaningful say?

Sen. Steve Vick, a Republican from Dalton Gardens, has proposed a bill, Senate Bill 1110, that would require initiative supporters to collect the signatures of at least 6% of the registered voters in all of the state's 35 legislative districts in 18 months.

Opponents say this would enable a single district to "veto" an initiative. No, it would just require sponsors to circulate their initiatives statewide instead of in just a handful of cities.

That is only fair.

In our opinion, if initiative supporters want a new law passed, they should do it the old-fashioned way. They should talk to their legislators.

It can be done, and the laws will be better because they will have gone through the legislative process.

Solution for lumber shortage can be found in our own backyard

In February a trade association representing general contractors urged President Joe Biden to provide relief from record lumber prices. Among their requests is to import more wood products from other countries.

However, a much better solution is available.

Contractors, consumers and the American public would be better served if the federal government increased timber supplies from the forest lands it manages. Doing so would not only support our homegrown lumber producers, it will also help meet heavy demand, support American jobs and boost rural economies.

Much has been written about soaring lumber prices that have been driven in part by pandemic-era "do-it-yourself" projects, as well as by a resilient housing market supported by low mortgage interest rates.

In the Pacific Northwest, our domestic lumber producers are doing everything possible to meet this demand but are hamstrung by workforce constraints and, especially, an unpredictable and unreliable supply of raw material. The common thread for producers is they are surrounded by millions of acres of federal forests that are not being managed for timber, forest health or wildfire mitigation.

The United States was once capable of meeting its own demand for wood products. For much of the 20th century, federal forests helped power the nation's post-war economy. National Forests in particular provided affordable lumber to meet domestic housing needs. They also provided a robust network of forest roads for log-

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Nick Smith



ging, firefighting and later outdoors recreation. And they provided a source of good-paying jobs and economic opportunities for many of our rural, forested communities.

But the dramatic decline in federal timber harvests starting in the early 1990s severely reduced our domestic logging and milling capacity across the west. Today the country is a net importer of wood despite our advantages in forested acres, modern milling technology and sustainable forest practices. Instead, we are outsourcing jobs and supplies to other countries, some of which do not share our environmental values and standards.

At the same time, much of our federally owned forests are unnaturally dense and overgrown. Millions of acres of these lands need active management to reduce the risks of wildfire, insects and disease. The opportunity exists for the federal government to expand its traditional partnership with the private sector to mitigate these risks while providing a supply of timber that meets the public's need for wood products and affordable housing.

Through proactive, science-based forest management, we can reduce the intensity of today's megafires, protect communities and save millions of taxpayer dollars in wildfire suppression costs. A reliable and sustainable supply of federal timber would also encourage domestic lumber produc-

ers to increase investments in their manufacturing facilities and workforce, thus increasing supply.

In addition, increasing domestic wood production can align with the Biden administration's climate agenda. Forest management reduces fuels and helps reduce the risks of severe wildfires that can emit carbon long after a fire is out. In addition to providing sustainable timber, forest management can also boost the resiliency of forests to climate change impacts, and thus maximize the ability of these forests to sequester and store carbon.

Further, wood products lock up carbon for life, and provide a natural, renewable and less energy-intensive alternative to other building materials. Through the development of advanced wood products such as Cross Laminated Timber, architects and builders are increasingly turning to wood to help meet sustainability goals.

When it comes to increasing lumber supplies, the solution can be found in our own backyard. By improving management of federal forests, we can improve the health and resiliency of these lands, reduce wildfire risks while supporting affordable housing through American-made and climate-friendly wood products.

Nick Smith is director of public affairs for the American Forest Resource Council, a regional trade association representing the forest products sector. He is also executive director of Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities, a non-partisan grassroots coalition that advocates for active management of America's federally owned forests.

Oregon's rural producers will benefit from Bentz's subcommittee leadership

Eastern Oregon scored a big victory last month with the selection of Congressman Cliff Bentz as the ranking member of the Water, Oceans and Wildlife (WOW) Subcommittee on the House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee. This is quite a feat for a freshman Member of Congress, but Rep. Bentz is well-suited to the task at hand.

For more than half of his professional and political career, Rep. Bentz has fought for Oregon agriculture and communities that rely on water resources and are feeling the effects of real and regulatory drought.

He began work as a practicing attorney in 1977, specializing in water and business law. Before being appointed to the Oregon Legislature in 2008, Mr. Bentz was appointed to the Oregon Water Resources Commission, serving from 1988 to 1996, chairing the commission his last year on the panel. He was appointed to the Oregon Legislature from District 60 in 2008, and was re-elected four times. He resigned his House seat in 2018 and moved over to the Senate, also by appointment.

In the Oregon House, Cliff Bentz served on several committees, including the Energy and Environment Committee. He was also co-vice chairman of the Joint Committee on Transportation Preservation and Modernization.

Many who have worked with him praise him for his ability to work with lawmakers from both political parties. We both have witnessed Cliff Bentz devour information and carefully assess complicated issues and areas like Klamath Basin water challenges. He works to understand issues before acting. He's a deep thinker, and appears to be open to all opinions. The fact that he

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Dan Keppen

& Paul Simmons



is a top expert in water law speaks for itself.

These traits and his experience will serve him well in his new role. The WOW Subcommittee has jurisdiction over the laws that govern the Bureau of Reclamation and U.S. Geological Survey, two federal agencies which play a vital role in the American West. The relations of the United States with Native Americans and tribes is of interest to this subcommittee.

The subcommittee also has jurisdiction on issues related to fish and wildlife (including research, restoration, refuges, and conservation), marine affairs, including coastal zone management, and public lands, including entry, easements and grazing.

All of these issues and areas are critically important to Rep. Bentz's constituents in Oregon's Second Congressional District, the seventh largest district in the country. Rep. Bentz has vowed to take an active role in the consideration of all water issues coming before the panel. Hot button issues include regulations under the Clean Water Act; encouraging responsible water storage policies, and promoting low-cost, renewable electric power from federal water projects.

The rural producers in Oregon's Second Congressional District and other parts of the West are fortunate to have someone with Cliff Bentz's skill set in the ranking member seat on the WOW Subcommittee. Should Republicans one day become the majority party in the House, there is

a very strong possibility that Cliff Bentz could chair that subcommittee.

For the time being, we will benefit from the ranking member's new leadership role, as well as the key positions held by our Oregon senators in the upper house of Congress. Senator Ron Wyden chairs the influential Senate Finance Committee and serves on several other committees, including the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which has jurisdiction over the Bureau of Reclamation. And Senator Jeff Merkley earlier this year assumed the chairmanship of the powerful Appropriations subcommittee that funds the U.S. Department of Interior, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.S. Forest Service.

Overall in the past 20 years, the bipartisan support and track record of Congressional Democrats and Republicans, and the focus by the George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations here in the Klamath Basin have been consistently strong. We are fortunate to have this type of political attention, and it says a lot about our local community's ability to effectively engage with Washington, regardless of which party is in control.

We anticipate further attention from President Biden's Administration, and we know the congressional delegation for Oregon's Second District will continue to serve well the needs of its farmers and ranchers.

Dan Keppen is executive director of the Family Farm Alliance, which represents irrigated agricultural interest in 16 Western states. Paul Simmons is executive director of the Klamath Water Users Association, which represents irrigation and other local districts served by the federal Klamath Project. Both work in Klamath Falls.

READERS' VIEW

Improving access to mental health services in rural Washington

Depression and suicide are an overlooked health crisis in our rural communities. Washingtonians living outside urban centers are left with fewer resources to address mental health issues and face unique hurdles in accessing those resources that are available. House Bill 1196 and its companion Senate Bill

5325 will help to expand behavioral health services available to our rural communities.

According to 2017 statistics from the Washington State Department of Health, the suicide rate in small towns/isolated rural areas was 21.2 per 100,000 people. This was about 24% higher than the average for the entire state. Rural communities are challenged with isolation, lack of access to care, and cultural stigmatizations around depression and suicide.

While Washington state has an overall higher rate of behav-

ioral health providers per population than the U.S., 35 of Washington's 39 counties are federally designated as Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas.

Farmers and agricultural workers face additional stressors due to unpredictable weather, crop failures, impacts of global trade policies and many other factors beyond their control. This further compounds existing mental health challenges in rural communities.

To address these challenges, Washington has begun requiring telehealth services be reimbursed

at the same rate as in-person care. Unfortunately, many rural Washingtonians lack adequate broadband access needed to take advantage of these services and current legislation excludes audio-only services from these requirements. An Emergency Order, issued by the Office of the Insurance Commissioner in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has temporarily allowed audio-only services, but a permanent change is needed to ensure Washington's rural communities continue to have needed access to mental health services.

House Bill 1196 and Senate Bill 5325 recognize the unique needs of Washington's rural agricultural communities and expand our telehealth program through the inclusion of audio-only services. This legislation has the potential to save lives and improve the health of farmers and farmworkers across the state. Those interested in this issue can help raise awareness by contacting your representatives and urging them to support this legislation.

*Jerod Morris
Spokane, Wash.*