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Opinion

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When every day is an emergency, oversight is required

Now more than a year on, state legislators across the country are taking steps to check the nearly unlimited emergency powers governors have assumed to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

It's about time.

A year ago, few of us would have envisioned an emergency that would prompt a governor to shut down large segments of the economy for under-terminated lengths of time, to close private and public schools and colleges, to forbid religious services and private gatherings, declare some businesses "essential" and others not, to rewrite the terms of rental contracts, and restrict access to common health-care procedures — all by decree and without the explicit consent of the people's elected representatives.

The COVID-19 outbreak presented a clear and present danger as it unfolded in the early spring. Little was known about the disease when it



Gary A. Warner/Oregon Capital Bureau File

The Oregon House chamber in the state Capitol in Salem.

arrived in the United States, but the catastrophic experiences of victims in other countries — China, Iran and Italy in particular — demonstrated the need for some swift action to curb infections.

Most Americans understood the need and accepted, even if reluctantly, that the exigencies of the situation required that governors use

the powers available to them under state law to meet the immediate emergency.

State laws generally give governors extraordinary powers to deal with emergencies. But in only a few instances did lawmakers have the forethought to put into place mandatory legislative oversight or time limitations on emergency declarations.

And in those states, such as Oregon, where the law gives legislatures discretionary authority to weigh in, few have cast votes to either affirm or challenge emergency declarations and the diktats issued in their name.

Until now. The New York Times reports that there are now more than 300 proposals across the country that would curb gubernatorial emergency powers.

Good.

We appreciate the necessity for quick and decisive action in the early hours and days of an emergency. Governors must be able to restore a semblance of order and safety without delay. But as the days stretch into weeks, the people, through their representatives, must be heard.

No elected official should be allowed to rule indefinitely by decree. Emergency powers should be limited in duration and subject to mandatory legislative oversight. A benevolent dictatorship in all but name is nonetheless tyranny.

Our View

Don't mess up food box program

When COVID-19 took hold of the nation last year, everyone was suddenly thrown into the deep end of the pool, farmers and ranchers included.

But while other businesses sent their employees home to work and others stayed home to with their kids after schools closed, farmers and ranchers were designated essential workers.

After all, people had to eat.

But at the same time, restaurants, school cafeterias, and nearly all other food outlets were shut down, many permanently.

And while shoppers inundated grocery stores to stock up on food, about half of farmers' customers remained closed.

These gyrations threw U.S. agriculture into a tailspin. Prices plummeted as commodities bound for restaurants and other foodservice outlets no longer had a buyer.

At one point, prices were in a free fall. Farmers were dumping milk, potatoes had no buyers at any price and ranchers saw the prices of their cattle plummet as processors closed or slowed production to deal with COVID-19 outbreaks among their employees.

The outlook was grim. Congress did step up with several rescue packages for agriculture and other segments of the economy.

But in addition to those efforts, one other initiative worked especially well. Called the Farmers to Families Food Box program, it purchased food from farmers and distributors, providing a much-needed

market for commodities.

Then the food was given to families in need. Because the pandemic disproportionately erased low-wage jobs from the economy, food boxes became part of the bulwark that prevented starvation from becoming a secondary COVID-19 symptom.

Put into action by the USDA, the food box program demonstrated that government can move quickly and effectively.

Demand for commodities returned and prices stabilized. Combined with direct aid that many farmers received, food boxes righted the agricultural economy.

The program was not perfect, and mid-course corrections addressed problems as they arose.

Overall, though, the success of food boxes is self-evident. Since last summer, USDA has spent almost \$5.5 billion on the program and delivered about 143.5 million food boxes.

With a new round of contracts coming up, the Biden USDA is now rethinking the food box program.

We hope they don't think too hard. Tens of millions of Americans — children, mothers, fathers, grandparents and others — need this program to get through this pandemic.

To politicize it at their expense would hurt everyone involved, including farmers.

Other than a few tweaks such as opening it to smaller-scale farmers, it would be folly to change it for the sake of change.

Our advice to Ag Secretary Tom Vilsack and his crew at USDA: Don't mess it up.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press File

USDA is looking for ways to improve the Farmers to Families Food Box program.

READERS' VIEW

ODA should extend pesticide license deadline

In early 2020, the Oregon Department of Agriculture, in a panic over COVID, took the pesticide license certification program to virtual only. License holders with poor computer skills or a lack of devices or in areas with poor internet connections were at a loss.

ODA sent its employees home while everyone else had to continue working, regardless of risk. For a license due for renewal in 2020, the five-year time frame was shortened by 20%.

ODA doesn't admit this. Training materials could be made available in many forms. Oregon State University has a modern print shop. DVDs and audio tapes can be eas-

ily and economically made available. Even OPB radio could be used. All that's needed is some imagination.

Larger employers could monitor and coach their people to keep the licenses current.

It's the individuals and older people who are being eliminated. Young people have the skills and devices.

The 2020 deadline should be extended. Considering all the loss and hardships of the last year, ODA should work with people. Concerns can be voiced at 971-719-6240 or pestx@oda.state.or.us.

We may never have open meetings again, and yes, we need to learn more computer skills, but ODA needs some patience also. The best stimulus check is a paycheck.

Ralph Locke
Sauvie Island
Portland, Ore.

A farmer's opinion of the Scout Energy Wind Farm Project

To the residents of the Tri Cities: In light of the ongoing debate about the Scout Wind Farm Project, I think it is time you are introduced to your neighboring community in the Horse Heaven Hills.

Yes, you heard that right. There are people that live in this dry, barren and seemingly isolated plateau that borders the south of Tri Cities.

You see, these hills are more than an afternoon escape for your bike rides and hikes. This is more than a place where you take scenic Sunday drives. This is more than the home of beautiful sunsets featuring Mount Adams, Rainier and Hood. This is more than the scenic view from your backyard.

And to another group of Tri Cities residents: This is more than a place for you to dump trash, unwanted dogs or dead livestock when you think nobody is looking. This is more than a place for your high school kids to take their girlfriend on Friday night. This is more than "the place where the dust comes from." This is more than a place for you to drive your Jeep and tear up a freshly seeded field. This is more than a place for you to go shooting and start wildfires in July. This is more than the place where the Hillbillies live.

This is the home of a family-based community, which is very old. My family has been here since 1946. Many others were original homesteaders here, who took a chance breaking out farm ground in a desert. We are proud to be dryland wheat farmers living on some of the driest non-irrigated farmland in the world.

This is the home of people whose neighbors live miles away, not city blocks. This is the home of people who get excited when they see rain clouds for the first time in weeks and are often disappointed when they change their path at the last minute, leaving their crops dry and thirsty.

This is the home of people who do without modern luxuries like wells or city water service, sewage service or reliable high-speed internet.

This is the home of people who started a volunteer fire department because they watched their friend burn up in a tractor trying to save his crop from wildfire. This is the home of people who face frequent hardships such as drought, blizzards, dust storms, poor crop prices, constantly rising input costs and increasing restrictions on how we make a living.

This is the home of people who watch housing developments pop up on land that used to be the farm of their grandfather's best friend. This is

the home of people who patch up their 20-year-old harvester, their 75-year-old plow and their 60-year-old planter year after year because the new technology coming out just isn't designed for such a small niche market.

This is a community of survivors, forgotten by the world and whose numbers are ever shrinking, but not going anywhere anytime soon. And lately we are feeling rather betrayed by our neighbors in the Tri Cities.

You see, we have recently been given a great opportunity. An opportunity to diversify our farm operation, increase our land value and raise our bottom line. An opportunity to insulate ourselves from unstable crop markets. An opportunity to maybe update some of our farm equipment and hopefully enter the 21st century one of these days.

An opportunity to not be quite so reliant on rain and financial aid to send our kids to college. An opportunity that will maybe let my father retire someday, instead of working himself to an early death like his father and grandfather before him. The name of this opportunity is the Scout Energy Wind Farm.

Now I'm not here to argue about how much energy these turbines will produce, where they will send it, or how they will store it. I'm not going to tell you I think they look pretty. But I will say shame on you for pretending to care about the beauty of an area that up until now, you have treated as your personal playground, your dumpster, a short-cut to Oregon, or the future site of more houses.

Shame on you for condemning construction on a ridge while hoping to someday build a mansion on the very same hill. Shame on you for being this upset about something that at the very most, would be a slight change to your backyard view. Because this same thing would be an absolute life-changing blessing to your neighboring community.

In closing, please don't feel this was written to bash the Tri Cities. The Tri Cities is a great community, which the Horse Heaven community benefits from as well. Every once in a while when we get a wild hair, we do get off our tractors and come to town. And guess where we go to buy groceries and clothing? Guess whose restaurants and small businesses we love to support? Yes that's right, we deeply care for, respect and support the Tri Cities community. We are just asking for the same in return. May we all grown and thrive together.

Christopher Wiley lives and farms in the Horse Heaven Hills of Eastern Washington.

GUEST VIEW

Christopher Wiley

