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Opinion

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Our View

Oregon Forest Resources Institute still needed

The Legislature created the Oregon Forest Resources Institute 29 years ago during the timber wars, which featured battles over logging, fierce debates over the role of state and federal forests in the timber industry and, most remarkably, the protection of the northern spotted owl under the federal Endangered Species Act.

The cost to Oregon's economy has been huge. Since 2001, the timber industry has lost 15,000 direct jobs.

The legislature's primary goal was to create an agency that would provide information and educational material to the public and schools about the timber industry and how it operates.

But there was a problem: The legislation creating the OFRI was unclear about how that would be done.

Fast forward to 2021 and a state audit that found the institute needs more oversight and direction.

The audit, requested by Gov. Kate Brown, followed criticism that the



Oregon State University

While the statute governing it needs to be fixed, the Oregon Forest Resources Institute is still important to the state.

OFRI had lobbied the legislature. Though many state agencies have "legislative liaisons" that do pretty much the same thing, critics felt the institute was out of line.

Any confusion can be attributed to the poorly written state law. "Portions of OFRI's statute are broad and vague, contributing to this ongoing lack of clarity as to what exactly OFRI is and what rules it is expected to follow," according to the audit.

The legislative record referenced in the audit shows lawmakers themselves were unclear about how the institute should operate. If legislators didn't write a law that was clear, how could OFRI's leaders know?

The audit compares the OFRI to the 22 state commodity commissions, which the Oregon Department of Agriculture oversees. The trouble with that comparison is that in 1991, when the OFRI was created by the legislature, commodity commissions weren't state agencies. They were only put under ODA's wing years later because of a series of rulings in California that found a state could not require growers to give money to private commissions.

The legislature solved that problem by transforming the commissions into state agencies. That allowed them to promote their crops and fund research — and lobby the legislature.

With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, the legislature could do the same with OFRI, except put it under state Department of Forestry instead of the ODA.

We encourage legislators to consider doing that.

In the meantime, the audit makes four suggestions to the OFRI. In her response, the institute's director agreed to all of them.

They include writing a single mission statement to follow and policies to make OFRI staffers follow what the state statute does not specify. Again, the statute is the root of the problem.

Earlier this year, some legislators tried to slash the OFRI's budget — which comes from the timber industry in the form of harvest taxes — as retribution for past transgressions, real or imagined.

That would be wrong.

The OFRI can and should play a role in keeping the public informed about the timber industry, which continues to be an important part of the state economy.

It's now up to the legislature to go back and resolve the problem it created.

Our View



Jennifer Wan/Getty Images

Grand Junction, Colo., and Mount Garfield as seen from the Colorado National Monument.

Keep the BLM headquartered in Grand Junction

The Interior Department is reviewing the Trump administration's decision to move the Bureau of Land Management's headquarters to Grand Junction, Colo., and critics are pushing the Biden administration hard to move it back to Washington.

We still believe an agency that controls 247 million acres, including 155 million acres of grazing land in the West, should be located in the West.

Members of Congress from the West, both Republicans and Democrats, have long agreed. So have other interests in the West. During the Trump administration they got an ally in then Secretary of Interior Ryan Zinke, a Montanan. The headquarters relocated to Grand Junction last August.

Critics of the move said it was an obvious ploy meant to rob the agency of valuable and experienced employees, firmly entrenched in the power circles of Washington, D.C. It appears the BLM apparatchiks weren't interested in moving to Colorado.

Our colleagues at Colorado Newline recently reported that 287 BLM headquarters employees either resigned or retired rather than relocate to Grand Junction, while 41 accepted relocation to other offices throughout the West. Only three moved to headquarters.

From the beginning, moving the BLM headquarters out of the capital was controversial — to the bureaucracy and the ruling class, anyway, but not to the people impacted by BLM regulations and decisions.

Critics say the BLM and other agencies need to be headquartered in the capital to be included in budget and policy discussions. But having all those discussions in Washington is part of the problem. That's better for K Street lobbyists and the environmental special interests, but not so good for the people those policies impact.

We understand why career bureaucrats might not want to move their families, particularly if spouses have jobs elsewhere in the government. That does not diminish the value of having decision makers closer to those they impact.

"Westerners deserve a voice in the land-use decisions that affect their lives daily," Rep. Lauren Boebert, who has introduced legislation requiring the agency to keep its headquarters in Grand Junction, said in a statement earlier this year. "Since 99% of the lands that the Bureau manages are West of the Mississippi, it only makes sense to have the agency located close to the communities it serves."

The logic of this idea isn't hard for people in the West to understand. BLM manages huge swaths of Western states. Its decisions impact the livelihoods of people who populate rural communities but those decisions are made far from the forests, grasslands and high deserts they call home.

Putting BLM headquarters in Grand Junction doesn't change its statutory mission. But it does give the agency bigwigs a different perspective and a better-than-nodding acquaintance with the territory they manage and the people who live there.

Government of the bureaucrats, by the bureaucrats, for the bureaucrats? No. Stay the course.

All Idahoans can play a part in conserving water

As a lifelong farmer and the chairman of the Idaho Water Resource Board, it's been amazing to watch our state's potential 2021 water supplies diminish from what was shaping up to be a comparatively decent winter with near-average snowpack in most areas of the state to a bone-dry spring.

Although major drought conditions have been present in portions of the state, we are now seeing drought setting in statewide.

An extreme triple-digit heat wave hit us early in June, and here we are in the traditionally hot and dry months of July and August, with no relief in sight.

The heat and the drought are hitting us like a one-two punch statewide, with a third uppercut coming in the form of wildfires and smoke.

Somehow, we must endure with rapidly diminishing water supplies as the extreme heat leads to increased water evaporation everywhere and reduced streamflow runoff from the mountains, while demand for water is increasing to irrigate crops on our farms, provide water for livestock, and supply water for all our needs in commerce and industry as well as for our homes and communities.

Unfortunately, this is a year when we'll see ag producers and others with junior water rights experience curtailment of their water rights that will cause severe economic hardship. In some basins without water storage facilities, they may run out of water entirely.

The Idaho Water Resource Board is charged by the Legislature to plan for Idaho's future water needs while also providing a plan for a sustainable supply of water for everyday use statewide. Our State Water Plan has a Sustainability Policy, adopted in 2016, that says, in part:

"Water is the foundation of Idaho's economy and culture; the lives and livelihoods of Idahoans depend on a reliable supply of water. Stewardship of Idaho's water resources begins with the realization that the water resources of the state are not inexhaustible."

Clearly, this is a year when we are experiencing the effects of drought across the state. As a board, we encourage everyone to do what they can to conserve water. Every single drop counts. Everyone can do their part.

"Be creative, be innovative, every little bit of conservation can go a long ways," says my colleague, Roger Chase, vice chair of the Idaho Water Board, who lives outside Pocatello.

There are many things that Idahoans can do on a voluntary basis to save water on the farm as well as in the city.

For example, many onion farmers in Southwestern Idaho have converted to drip irrigation to produce the best crops while saving water and money from less energy use.

In Eastern Idaho and the Magic Valley, some farmers have con-

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verted pivot sprinklers to low-elevation sprinkler applications that lower water nozzles down to just above the crops, to increase efficiency by reducing evaporation.

Crop experts from the University of Idaho Extension and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) help farmers determine how much water is needed to grow various crops. Using this expertise, it's possible to check soil-moisture levels on an ongoing basis to ensure that you're not over-watering.

Water Board member Dean Stevenson recommends fixing leaks on sprinkler wheel lines, checking the pumping pressure, the regulators and nozzles on pivot systems to ensure they're all in good working order. It's important to maximize the efficiency of our irrigation systems and avoid irrigating when conditions such as afternoon heat cause more evaporation, he says.

Often times, we see end guns on pivots watering the roads or areas outside the boundary of a farm field. Water Board member Brian Olmstead recommends shutting off end guns to save water being applied on non-cropland, including roads, and using a hand line or other higher-efficiency application method to cover a hard-to-reach area of a field.

In our cities, municipal water providers are providing many recommendations for conserving water, including watering lawns in the early morning hours or at night, xeriscaping, and finding ways to save water in the home. It takes 27 gallons of water to wash dishes by hand, for example, compared to 3 gallons in a modern, efficient dishwasher. Fixing a leaky toilet can save up to 100 gallons of water per day.

A cover for your swimming pool can save thousands of gallons per year just by reducing evaporation.

Idaho's State Water Plan calls on our citizens to conserve water on a voluntary basis. Whatever you can do to save water may free up water supplies for others who have a desperate need. Any farmers with surplus water can offer up extra water for lease or rent in a local water rental pool or through the state water supply bank.

In addition to the immediate need to conserve, the Water Board continues to look for ways to capture more of our water resources for use within the state. The board will work with Gov. Brad Little, the Legislature and all stakeholders to plan, develop and provide for additional ways to meet our current needs and prepare for the future.

Jeff Raybould is the chairman of the Idaho Water Resource Board. He farms in St. Anthony.