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Opinion

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Our View

Gubernatorial candidates need to listen to rural Oregon

This is the season not only for Christmas trees and year-end celebrations but for Oregon's gubernatorial candidates to shift into high gear in anticipation of the 2022 election.

First off, we want to wish all of the candidates the best. At last count, 28 candidates were in the running for the Democratic or Republican nominations, and a handful of others were in the wings. Add the independents and third-party candidates, and Oregonians will have plenty to choose from in the November general election.

Running for governor is a grueling and sometimes demeaning undertaking in which candidates are often marketed like boxes of cereal. Armed with the latest polls and piles of donations, they ply their trade with one goal in mind — getting Oregonians to vote for them.



EO Media Group File/East Oregonian
Oregonians will choose a new governor next year.

Many of them seem to be saying, "Be reasonable, and see it my way."

Others seem to be quoting a character in the movie "Napoleon Dynamite," who promised during a student council election, "Vote for me and all of your dreams will come true."

But that's all backwards. Candidates need to reflect Oregonians' views, not the other way around.

Only then will the state's voters get a governor worthy of their support.

We have a suggestion for the candidates. Instead of presenting voters will pre-packaged platforms, why not go where Oregonians live? And listen, really listen.

Those of us who live in rural parts of the state — the vast majority of Oregon's 98,466 square miles — know what it's like to be ignored or, almost as bad, patronized.

A candidate from Portland — whose area is a puny 145 square miles — or some other city will often do a drive-by "appearance" in rural Oregon aimed at getting some attention in the press and then head for the next stop.

But in the process what do they learn about rural Oregon? Do they understand the stress and hardship laws written for urban areas can have on the rural residents and their economy? If they do, what have they done about it?

Do they know the difference

between throwing money at a problem and solving it?

And in this era of COVID, what, specifically, would they have done differently if they were governor? Should tiny Burns be subjected to the same regulations as Portland?

The answers to those and other questions should not come from bullet points from a canned speech but from serious discussions of the issues with working rural Oregonians.

We're not just talking about meeting with the local bigwigs. We're talking about the folks who farm and ranch, who work at dairies and nurseries or who punch a time clock at a factory or processing plant.

The squeaky wheels in Portland and the rest of urban Oregon get plenty of attention. It's time for the politicians to listen to the drive wheels that make this state's economy go.

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Don Jenkins/Capital Press File

Cattle graze in a southwest Washington pasture. The state Department of Ecology has shifted gears on its policy on watering cattle from rivers and streams.

Washington Ecology thankfully taps the brakes

We are happy that the Washington Department of Ecology has put the brakes on adopting a policy that would require every livestock owner to have a permit to water their animals from a stream.

Now we only hope farmers and ranchers are able to get the proposal quashed permanently.

Late last month Ecology announced that it was revising its internal policy on cattle, horses, sheep and other livestock drinking from streams, ponds and other surface waters.

The policy — neither a law nor a regulation — would have guided Ecology's advice to landowners and responses to complaints about livestock.

Ecology's policy lead Kasey Cykler told the Capital Press that the department wanted to clarify that the state's water code, adopted in 1917, requires Ecology to appropriate water for beneficial use.

"Really, it's black and white, a water right is required and always has been," she said. "We can't have a policy in direct conflict with the law."

That took farmers and ranchers by surprise, because they say that's not how the department has managed surface water in the past.

In 1994, Ecology adopted a policy encouraging livestock owners to get their animals away from streams by diverting water. The 1994 policy said nothing about a water right.

Ecology and farm groups agree that policy improved water quality, as livestock owners

learned to pump small amounts of water from streams and ditches to troughs. Area conservation districts have helped farmers install the necessary technology.

Conservation district officials say the department's new interpretation of water law would likely stop those efforts and lead more producers without water rights to water their stock directly from streams.

Our sources say a lot of producers don't have surface water rights because they didn't think they needed one. It's unlikely they'd be able to get one if they applied.

The impact of Ecology's proposal could devastate the livestock industry. Critics describe the policy as a hammer the department could use to smash the industry. Sympathetic legislators say the department is trying to rewrite water law while sidestepping the legislature.

"This is a massive sea change," Washington State Dairy Federation policy director Jay Gordon said. "It's affecting massive numbers of people around the state."

As implausible as it seems, Ecology officials seem equally perplexed that farmers and ranchers have a different interpretation. While not backing entirely away from the proposal, it has agreed to take more time to listen to farmers and ranchers.

Livestock producers and their allies should make the most of the reprieve and do whatever possible to maintain the status quo as they understand it.

A market solution for hunting access

With hunting season underway, a familiar challenge unfolds. Hunters seek publicly managed wildlife, but much of the prime habitat is owned by private landowners. While most landowners aren't opposed to granting access to responsible hunters, they understandably don't want to open their gates to every Joe Schmo with a rifle. And while most hunters respect property rights, no hunter can spend all their free time knocking on landowners' doors asking for permission to hunt.

It's a classic problem of supply and demand. How can the demanders of wildlife (hunters) connect with the suppliers of wildlife habitat (landowners) in a way that promotes win-win cooperation instead of conflict and resentment? Fortunately, as new technologies emerge, some entrepreneurs are taking a shot at solving this problem — and the early results are promising, to the benefit of both hunters and landowners.

One leader in this space is LandTrust, a startup based in Bozeman, Mont. LandTrust uses an online marketplace to provide hunting opportunities on private lands. Think of it like Airbnb, but for private land recreational access. Any landowner can enroll, set their own rules and prices, and manage who has access to their property and for what purposes. Hunters can browse available hunting opportunities and request daily bookings at hundreds of properties across the country.

This innovative approach has the potential to solve many of the West's bitter hunting-access debates, which often pit landowners against sportsmen. Landowners can earn extra revenue from allowing managed hunting, while hunters gain exclusive access that would otherwise be difficult to find. And it's not just for the uber-rich, either. Hunting opportunities on LandTrust are available in some areas for as little as \$50.

Such a platform can be used to enhance access for a variety of recreational purposes. On LandTrust, landowners can opt to allow walk-in access across their property, allowing users to unlock access to parcels of public land that are otherwise inaccessible or difficult to reach.

And if hunting's not your game, LandTrust can be used to find opportunities for fishing, hiking, horseback riding, and even bird watching.

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Other examples are popping up elsewhere. The Alberta-based Canadian Land Access System uses a similar online interface to provide access to private lands for hunting, fishing, biking and other forms of outdoor recreation. Users book access to a property and then scan in and out at access sites, notifying the landowner of their presence and allowing users to receive up-to-date access rules. Hipcamp uses a related model for camping on private lands throughout North America.

The benefit of these systems is not just that they connect supply and demand — it's also in how they build trust among users. The platforms verify users' identification, require prepayment via credit card, and provide dual rating systems to ensure accountability and weed out bad actors. They also solve another crucial access challenge: liability. LandTrust, for example, provides landowners with general liability insurance and handles all waivers from users, giving landowners peace of mind that they can allow access without exposing themselves to liability risks.

Such an approach could generate immense benefits for ranchers and farmers and the wildlife they support, which in turn benefits all hunters. Market approaches like this enable landowners to diversify their incomes and help sustain large working landscapes from the threat of subdivision or other land uses. And they are far better than mandates, regulation, and other government-led approaches to enhance access, which can backfire by straining relationships between landowners and sportsmen.

The wildlife that hunters enjoy doesn't fall from the sky. Its survival often depends on the private landowners who provide habitat. The more we can do to support entrepreneurial solutions that help landowners continue to provide habitat while also enhancing public access, the better off we all will be — hunters and landowners alike.

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