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Our View

When environmental priorities collide

What takes priority in Washington state, solar farms or sage grouse habitat?

It's quite the conundrum.

Aurora Solar LLC wants to build a 2,390-acre solar farm on Badger Mountain in north-central Washington. That fits with Gov. Jay Inslee's climate priorities. The governor has made climate change a focus of his administration, and his policy initiatives encourage the construction of solar farms.

The land where Aurora wants to build is mostly unirrigated farmland, and perfect for a solar facility. Unfortunately, Badger Mountain is in Douglas County, the greater sage grouse's "last stronghold" in the state, according to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Greater sage grouse are a state



USFWS
A greater sage grouse, rear, struts for a female at a lek, or mating ground.

endangered species. According to Fish and Wildlife, there are 699 of the birds in the state, but Douglas County has the only self-sustaining population.

Last spring, after wildfires burned other sage grouse habitat in the county, 29 male sage grouse were seen on Badger Mountain. Along with the females, Badger Mountain

likely has about 75 grouse, according to Fish and Wildlife.

The only greater sage grouse known in Washington outside Douglas County are 24 males in Yakima County and three males in Franklin County.

Fish and Wildlife says the solar project could finish off the state's greater sage grouse population.

The project is now before the Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council. Fish and Wildlife opposes the project, as do sage grouse advocates. If EFSEC approves the project, its recommendation will go to Inslee for a final decision.

What's a committed environmentalist and enthusiastic alternative energy advocate to do?

We admit to being a bit ambivalent on this point. We think landowners should generally be allowed to use

their land for its best use as they see fit. At the same time, we generally think that farmland should remain farmland whenever possible.

Solar facilities have a big footprint. They require wide open spaces. That means developers look to farmland to site their facilities.

Installing the infrastructure necessary to build a functioning solar facility is no small bit of engineering. Once a facility is in place, it is unlikely that land will ever be turned back to the plow.

Dryland wheat farming and the sage grouse, however, seem to co-exist — at least better than birds and solar panels.

Badger Mountain seems to put Inslee between a rock and a hard place. Which environmental interest group will he disappoint? We can't wait to see the case he makes.

Our View



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

A new survey shows wide public support for the four lower Snake River dams despite politicians' proposals to destroy them.

Survey shows regionwide support for Snake River dams

Recently on this page we urged Oregon politicians to go to rural parts of the state and seek out the opinions of the people who live there. Why? Because political leaders need to reflect the viewpoints of their constituents, not the other way around.

This is not unique to Oregon. Politicians in other states are also guilty of ignoring the viewpoints of their constituents.

In Washington state, this is certainly the case with Gov. Jay Inslee's push to demolish the lower Snake River dams. He and U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., are working on a political sales pitch aimed at taking out the dams. They argue making that stretch of the river impassable for the barges that transport wheat and other crops would be good for the state. They also argue the low-cost electricity the dams generate won't be missed, despite evidence to the contrary.

The idea of taking out the dams gained momentum with a proposal from an eastern Idaho member of Congress, Rep. Mike Simpson, who apparently didn't ask his constituents what they think of the idea, either.

In his proposal, Simpson estimates that replacing the benefits of the dams — including power generators, highways and railroad tracks — would cost more than \$33 billion, which would

come from taxpayers.

So what do the people of Washington, Idaho and Oregon think about tearing down the lower Snake River dams?

The short answer: Don't do it.

This answer is found in a survey of residents of the three Northwest states. In the survey, commissioned by Northwest RiverPartners, members of the public were asked what they think about destroying the dams and giving up the low-cost electricity they provide.

Northwest RiverPartners is a member-driven organization that serves not-for-profit, community-owned electric utilities in the region.

The answers to that question were unequivocal. The majority of Republicans and Democrats are against it. People who live on both sides of the Cascade Range oppose it. People who live in Idaho oppose it.

All told, only 29% of the 1,200 respondents regionwide favored getting rid of the lower Snake River dams to help salmon. An even smaller percentage, 17%, was against the use of the lower Snake River dams to generate electricity.

Considering the results of the survey and the cost to the public, it's clear this is just one more example of politicians trying to impose their will on the public, which would then get stuck with the bill.

We need multiple tools to protect ag land

Last week the Capital Press printed an editorial in favor of the program established by the Oregon legislature to protect farmland through "working land easements" that "limit the non-farm activities and development that can take place on it."

If funded, this program, which is called the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program, would indeed provide great benefits to Oregon farmers and ranchers who wish to protect their land and pass it on to the next generation. We thank Capital Press for highlighting this important program.

However, the editorial referred to the program as the Oregon Agricultural Trust. I am writing to respectfully clarify that, while our names are similar, the Oregon Agricultural Trust (OAT) and the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program (OAH) are two distinct and unaffiliated entities.

The Trust — OAT — is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that partners with Oregon farmers and ranchers to protect agricultural lands for the benefit of Oregon's economy, communities, and landscapes. We do this using working land easements, which could be funded by OAH. We also educate farmers and ranchers and their service providers about succession planning and easements.

The Program — OAH — is a grant program established by the Oregon legislature and run by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board. OAH funds not only working land easements, but also conservation management plan activities, succession planning education, and technical assistance. So, while the Oregon Agricultural Trust strongly supports funding for the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program, OAT is a separate entity from OAH.

The editorial also suggested that easements could functionally replace a land use program. We submit that this isn't the goal of OAH, and that working land easements actually work best in a state with a strong land use program.

As the editorial stated, "unbridled development is detrimental to farming and ranching." Over the last 50 years, Oregon's land use program has been very effective at mitigating this threat. Prior to land use, agricultural land was being lost to development at a dramatic rate. And while the land use program has not completely prevented the loss of Oregon's agricultural land (including some of the best soils in the world that are now under pavement), it has demonstrably slowed its loss. One need only look to California — where Orange County used to actually grow oranges — to see the difference.

GUEST VIEW
Nellie McAdams



Working land easements are a very useful tool for protecting key properties and for helping landowners get cash and tax benefits from their real estate while keeping the operation in production. And unlike land use, their protection is permanent. But they are expensive. There will never be enough money to protect even a significant portion of Oregon's ag land using easements alone. And relying only on easements means that protection and development could be scattershot, creating neighbor conflicts and uncertainty.

By contrast, all of Oregon's ag land is afforded a baseline of protection by our land use program (which creates minimum lot sizes and limits non-farm uses on ag land) and farm and forest tax deferral (which assesses property tax based on the land's ag value — not development value).

These programs were designed by a governor and legislators who were farmers and ranchers to protect their industry. And since the early 1970s, land use has been largely responsible for maintaining Oregon's agricultural land base and economy. It may not be perfect, but without land use, agriculture simply would no longer be feasible in some parts of the state.

Easements are a great tool, but they do not afford the same base protection as land use. For example, in Maryland where their easement program is well-funded but they lack a robust land use program, putting an easement on one property increases the development pressure on surrounding farmland — there's a market for homes with a view onto a permanently protected farm.

In Oregon, by contrast, when an easement permanently protects a critical farm and ranch, the surrounding ag land continues to benefit from land use's baseline protections.

In summary, easements and land use are both important tools for protecting our agricultural soils and landscapes and the farm and ranch businesses that depend upon them. Ideally, a state does not make an either/or choice between these two tools, but rather ensures that both easements and land use are in their tool box for ag viability.

While Oregon has an easement grant program on the books, it has yet to be funded. The Oregon legislature should fund the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program in 2022 to help protect Oregon's agricultural land for future generations.

Nellie McAdams is executive director of the Oregon Agricultural Trust.

READERS' VIEW

Time to end state of emergency, get back to normal

Catching-up on my print media and appreciated your opinion "650 days of emergency and counting" with Governor Brown in her ivory tower extending our never-ending state of emergency yet once again with a complete disregard for our constitutional system, balance of powers and consent of the governed.

The natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground, observed Thomas Jefferson. The people we elected to lead our community of the pandemic are now a bigger

problem than the pandemic itself.

The definition of insanity — we are never going to get back to normal, back to work, in school unmasked, and out of this mess in Oregon by voting Democrat in the next election. COVID remains an entrenched expression of their identity, control and rationale to continue reckless spending and increasing dependence on government to further their selfish purposes by robbing many tomorrows for today's votes versus incentivizing individual responsibility and initiative that creates real opportunity and leads to the American Dream.

On the dole in the ward without dignity over plain old-fashioned hard work induces a spiritual and

moral disintegration destructive to our national fiber and saps the human spirit, not to mention growing inflation that is robbing from everyone. If Americans want security at all costs and no risks to living life, then they can go bankrupt and into prison where they have no liberty or freedom.

Our political system is in crisis under self-righteous, one-party rule. We need to get back to the basic pillars of this republican model of government and to the "radical middle" where cooperation, compromise and normal is found, not the tyranny of executive orders and rules not backed by law.

Nate Sandvig
Neskowin, Ore.