

Editorials are written by or approved by members of the Capital Press Editorial Board.

All other commentary pieces are the opinions of the authors but not necessarily this newspaper.

Opinion

Editor & Publisher
Joe Beach
Managing Editor
Carl Sampson
opinions@capitalpress.com | CapitalPress.com/opinion

Our View

It's time for Oregon to do more to fight illicit drug trade

The legalization of recreational marijuana in Oregon has generated millions of dollars in tax revenue for the state, but rather than curtailing the black market trade as was promised it has spurred the production of illegal weed across the state.

That, in turn, has caused untold problems for honest landowners and unwitting foreign workers pressed to tend the crops.

The state has failed in its obligation to stem the flow of illegal marijuana and to protect the people of Oregon against the ravages of that trade.

The burgeoning illicit marijuana industry has had devastating impacts on rural Oregon and agriculture. Illegal marijuana growers have stolen water, polluted the land and water, violated land use laws, driven up farmland prices, caused labor problems and endangered citizens.

Although new state laws and added funding are helping law enforcement officers deal with the issues, farmers



Kile Henrich/MET

Living conditions at an unlicensed Oregon marijuana operation. In the center lies the remains of a pig carcass workers had been carving for food.

and community leaders say more still needs to be done.

Eight years ago, when voters approved an initiative that legalized the regulated production, sale and possession of marijuana, it was sold as a win-win situation.

The state was to get millions in new tax revenue to pay for education, mental health, alcoholism and drug services, the state police and drug treatment. Because marijuana remains illegal under federal law, an intense

regulatory and licensing regime was supposed to keep “legal” marijuana out of black market distribution channels and stepped up enforcement would check the state’s robust illicit marijuana production.

Only part of that scenario has come true.

Revenue projections have exceeded supporters’ wildest dreams as legal sales have topped \$1.1 billion per year.

In fiscal 2016, the state collected \$20.6 million in taxes from the fledgling legal industry, according to the Oregon Department of Revenue. For fiscal 2021, which ended in October, the state raked in more than \$178 million. Cities and counties that have imposed their own taxes reaped more than \$28 million from the “legal” drug trade during the same period.

Yet, the illicit trade continues to boom. Law enforcement sources say the value of illegal weed — grown in many cases by foreign drug cartels — far exceeds that produced by regulated growers. During raids in 2021 alone, according to public records, South-

ern Oregon officials across four counties — Jackson, Douglas, Klamath and Josephine — seized pot exceeding \$2.7 billion in value.

Criminal growers are stealing water, infringing on the rights of farmers who produce legitimate crops. Unfettered by environmental regulations and good stewardship practices, they lay on fertilizers and pesticides without regard to the potential ecological damage.

They have held foreign workers impressed to tend the crop in virtual slavery. Local property owners have been threatened and are wary of sharing information with police.

Police and the regulatory agencies are overwhelmed.

We agree that the federal government needs to step up its enforcement efforts. But the state of Oregon needs to devote more of its “legal” marijuana profits towards regulatory and law enforcement.

It’s time for the state to fulfill its obligation to protect the people of Oregon.

Our View



Lowe Stock

Water is the key ingredient in Washington state's economy.

An idea that will hold water

There may be issues more important to the people of Washington state than water, but we can’t think of any.

Water is the key ingredient in everything Washingtonians hold dear — farming, ranching, wineries, fruit orchards, recreation, fish. ... Without water, the entire state would dry up and blow away.

The flip side is what happens when there’s too much water, which has happened in numerous locations this winter, courtesy of drenching rainfall and the floods that followed.

That’s why we are surprised by the way state government often treats water-related issues. A fine will be issued, or a water right will be denied, as though that will solve the problem.

An office within the state Department of Ecology has shown that far more can be accomplished by working with farmers and other water users than by playing the role of water cop.

The Office of the Columbia River has over the years proved its value to water users, conservationists, tribes and municipalities in Central Washington. By listening to all of the parties and working with them, the office has been able to discover solutions to problems that at first seemed unsolvable.

“We’re charged with ‘aggressively pursuing’ water solutions that concurrently meet water needs for families, industry and farms (out-of-stream), and ecosystems and fish (instream),” according to the office’s website.

“Aggressively pursuing solutions” — we like that phrase.

The office was instrumental in helping

farmers and others in the Odessa Subarea obtain water to replace wells that had failed or were in danger of failing. Construction of the project is underway, and the region’s economy will see the benefits for many decades to come.

Beyond that, the office has been responsible for finding sources of water where it’s needed. That work is crucial for the future of Washington state.

Derek Sandison, director of the Washington State Department of Agriculture, knows his way around Central Washington. He was previously director of the Office of the Columbia River.

Sandison recently offered a trial balloon in Olympia. He posed a question: Would it make sense to expand the functions of the office to other watersheds beyond the Columbia River?

In 2018, the legislature created the Office of the Chehalis Basin to seek solutions for the catastrophic flooding that occasionally inundates that area.

But there are other regions of the state that need a full-time champion to work with all of the parties to “aggressively pursue solutions.”

“We think it’s a good idea,” Sandison told the Capital Press. “We’ve been dealing with seemingly intractable problems in the Skagit, for example. Without a program like Office of the Columbia River, there’s not a lot of answers.”

Add the Nooksack River Basin and the Clallam and Dungeness areas to the list of the many places across the state that need help bringing their water picture into focus.

Considering all of that, we hope the Legislature will agree that Sandison’s idea holds water.

Buffer bill is anti-agriculture

HB 1838 asks Washingtonians to save fish habitat at the expense of rural communities. The bill proposes an expansion of riparian mitigation areas from their current range of 50 to 100 feet from the high-water mark to between 100 and 249 feet, depending upon the site.

The establishment of buffer zones of 150 feet along 1 mile of riparian zone are the equivalent of 18 acres of farmland. Most urban areas are exempt from the rules of the bill.

If a landowner must remove more than half an acre of land from agricultural production, they must be compensated “at least equal to the amount that would be offered under the conservation reserve enhancement program if the affected lands were enrolled in that program for 10 years, regardless of whether the lands are actually eligible for the conservation reserve enhancement program.”

However, that reimbursement for the land disqualifies the landowner from participating in agricultural activities on that land in perpetuity.

Compensation to participate in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program is approximately \$100 per acre annually. So, for approximately \$1,000 per acre (\$100 a year for 10 years), farmers are banned from ever farming their land in a riparian zone again. The average reported cost per acre for high-quality farm ground in Washington state in 2019 was \$13,000 an acre.

Further, the land compensation rate contradicts the bill’s own language noting, “Private property shall not be taken for public use without just compensation having been made. The property rights of landowners shall be protected from arbitrary and discriminatory actions.” Compensating landowners less than 10% of the market value of their farmland is far from “just compensation.”

Along with a lack of proper compensation, HB 1838 is not a voluntary program. Private property owners will be identified by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife as having riparian zones in need of restoration. After private property owners have been notified of the need to restore their riparian zones, they have 30 days to comply with the order by self-funding the pur-

GUEST VIEW
Pam Lewison



chase, planting, and maintenance in perpetuity of trees as recommended by the Department of Fish and Wildlife. Private property owners who are found to be in breach of the 30-day compliance window will be fined \$10,000 a day, every day until they comply with the order.

The caveat to the self-funding of these riparian zone installations is that HB 1838 proposes to “cover at least 70 percent of the landowner’s cost to establish and maintain the riparian management zone, or 90% of the landowner’s cost if there is an economic hardship.”

Meanwhile, the Washington State Department of Ecology’s Wetland Mitigation Resources program is a promise between our state and its residents to “achieve a no-overall-net loss in the amount (acreage) and function of Washington’s remaining wetlands” is chronically underfunded by the legislature.

If Washington state wants to save salmon, first and foremost, everyone should have skin in the game, not just the people who happen to have water running through their property or who happen to live in a rural community. Oftentimes, rural communities bear the burden of environmental policies like these while people in urban areas are given a free pass to sit back in judgment of their compatriots.

Yet, rural communities are also most often home to those with the deepest connection to the natural resources they are alleged to have ravaged. For people in rural areas, healthy environments are critical to existence and ruining them is the surest way to end their livelihoods.

There is no justice in HB 1838 for fish, for waterways, or for Washingtonians. Real change that benefits everyone requires voluntary participation and buy in from every person in Washington, not just the ones living outside the confines of urban control.

Pam Lewison is the agriculture research director for the Washington Policy Center.