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Opinion

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Our View

Reviewing two years of COVID-19

On Saturday, the indoor mask mandates imposed by the governors of Oregon, Washington and California will be lifted.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has also announced that the state of emergency that was put in place on March 8, 2020, will expire April 1.

Huzzah!

Officially, the lifting of the mask requirement reflects declining COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations in the West Coast states. Others suggest the announcements were coordinated with other Blue state governments to suggest a return to “normalcy” before President Biden’s State of the Union address and in advance of the midterm election campaign.

Whatever the reason, we are nonetheless thankful for the reprieve — even if it later proves temporary.

Two years and change into the pandemic, it behooves us to take stock of where we have been and



Ryan Brennecke/EO Media Group

COVID-19 vaccine. What lessons have politicians learned from the COVID-19 pandemic?

offer some observations.

- COVID-19 qualified as a clear and present danger as it unfolded in the early spring of 2020. Little was known about the disease when it arrived in the United States.

In that context, the “two-weeks-to-flatten-the-curve” shutdown made some sense. But as those “two weeks” dragged into more than three months, this seemed less like a thoughtful strategy and more like a

desperate effort to outlast the virus.

- While government can quickly shut the economy down, starting it back up again isn’t that easy.

- State government was unprepared to deal with the impacts its measures inflicted on working people and their employers. Shuttering the economy left more than half a million people on the West Coast scrambling for a paycheck.

- We have been told to “follow the science.” Being strong believers of facts, we put a lot of stock in science.

But, the exhortation to “follow the science” has too often been used as a cudgel with which to beat critics.

Science is not religious dogma. It is an open question, not a declarative statement. We don’t say this to benefit crackpots and conspiracy theorists, but to encourage reasoned debate.

Officials conveying science have too often failed to concede that the body of knowledge is ever changing.

We have always been strong advocates for vaccinations, and still are.

Initially, we were told the vaccines would prevent infections and transmission in most cases. Then we were told that in most cases it would only keep people from getting really sick. That’s still a worthy outcome, but not what conveyors of science promised in the beginning.

Policy makers have been the strongest proponents of “the science,” but have been willing to forego the science for political expediency.

- 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.

Most people learned to live with the virus months ago. We are happy that the governors are learning it, too. We hope in future emergencies that they put more trust in the instincts of their constituents.

Our View



U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

The Anderson Ranch Dam in Idaho is slated to be expanded.

Water visionaries needed in the West

Water is the dominant issue in Western agriculture, yet we have to wonder whether some folks really get it.

California, by virtue of its climate, has understood the importance of water since European settlers first arrived hundreds of years ago. Much of the region was a desert. Without water, it would stay that way.

With water, California would bloom to provide food to the U.S. and much of the world.

Dams were built, the Colorado River was tapped and a massive water works was constructed to move water from areas that had excess supplies to areas that were dry.

The problem: During droughts, there is precious little excess.

That’s why the people of California and the folks at the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation are moving forward with plans to build more reservoirs to store water when it is plentiful and redistribute it when it’s not.

The Los Vaqueros Reservoir in northeast California and the B.F. Sisk Dam in Merced County are slated to be expanded, adding a total of 290,000 acre-feet of storage.

A new reservoir at Sites with a capacity of 1.5 million acre-feet is in the works, and a new reservoir, at Del Puerto Canyon, with a capacity of 82,000 acre-feet, is in the planning stages.

It’s clear that Californians and the Bureau of Reclamation are serious about providing more water to the farms and ranches and the people.

Likewise, the people of Idaho and Washington state have projects ranging from expanding dams to recharging aquifers to expanded use of Columbia River water.

The contrast between those states and Oregon is stark. While some dams are being expanded to provide more irrigation water in places like the Hood River area, and irrigation districts in northeastern Oregon have built a new expanded pipeline network, other parts of the state remain parched. Central Oregon, the Klamath Basin, Harney County, Eastern Oregon — even the Willamette Valley — are in need of facilities that will help them get through dry spells.

We are told that dry spells will be more frequent as the climate continues to change, yet the major efforts offered by political leaders are long-range and would have little or no impact for decades.

We will still need more water in the meantime. Droughts happen, and being lectured about buying an electric tractor or truck as a way to address them is off-putting.

We need someone who will stand up and see the possibilities. A state with one of the largest rivers on the continent at its northern border should never be short of water. Pipelines, lake taps, reservoirs, recharged aquifers and dams can make sure the people of Oregon will have plenty of water for not just decades but for centuries to come.

We’re listening for someone to take the lead in assuring Oregon’s water future.

Labor union power-play will result in job losses for farm employees

Mandatory overtime pay in agriculture has been in the works for more than a year in Oregon. Republicans have been part of the conversation, bringing in stakeholders from the farm community to create a unique Oregon solution.

Our objective has been legislation reflective of Oregon’s agriculture industry that protects the ability for farm employees to work the number of hours they want while respecting the struggles small family farms endure to break even.

Instead of pursuing this measured approach, discussions on overtime legislation came to a halt this session and a union-backed, partisan bill was forced through, passing the House on party lines.

An abrupt halt to discussions isn’t new. Earlier this winter labor advocates walked away from the negotiating table having decided to drop a lawsuit they had been pursuing behind the scenes all along.

The legal challenge from the Oregon Law Center in December completely undermined good-faith talks a year in the making. The Legislature was threatened with a draconian version of overtime from the Oregon Bureau of Labor & Industries (BOLI) if we failed to act. These special interests prefer to play politics at the expense of jobs and wages for farm employees across the state.

Legislation that could negatively impact the livelihood of workers and farm owners should not be rushed in a 35-day short legislative session. However, Republicans continued to bring ideas to the table for a workable Oregon solution.

The final Republican proposal would have guaranteed increased pay to farm workers for extra hours worked with a \$50 million grant. Democrats voted this down in favor of a bill that will cut the hours and wages of farm employees while giving tax breaks to profitable corporate farms.

Oregon is now singled out among a handful of states that imposes high labor costs on cash-strapped family farms trying to fill our grocery stores with local, affordable produce. Farmers in our state will compete against farm-

GUEST VIEW

Rep. Shelly Boshart Davis



Rep. Daniel Bonham



ers in other states that don’t have overtime requirements for farm workers. In California, the only state with a current 40-hour threshold, these restrictions have cut worker hours and pay as farmers have been forced to cap hours at 40.

Because of Democrats’ decision to pursue a partisan solution, hours will be capped, which means less pay to workers, automation and mechanization of farming will be expedited, which means less jobs, and small farms will be consolidated by corporate conglomerates, resulting in less family farms in Oregon. There are zero positive outcomes from this bill.

Several Democratic legislators recognized these negative outcomes and supported a Republican motion to send this bill back to committee in favor of an Oregon solution. This motion narrowly failed.

That is the definition of failed leadership from the Democratic super majority, ignoring bipartisan opposition to their agenda. They pursued a partisan, all-or-nothing approach driven by labor unions at the expense of all Oregonians working in the agriculture industry.

Legislators from both sides of the aisle have stated on the record that this proposal will result in job losses for farmworkers. There is no appropriate justification for taking jobs away from Oregonians trying to put food on their families’ tables.

We will need to fix this legislation in 2023 to save farm employee jobs. To achieve that, we will need more balance in the Legislature and a majority that stands up to partisan special interests and puts people above politics.

Rep. Shelly Boshart Davis represents Albany, and Rep. Daniel Bonham represents The Dalles in the Oregon Legislature. Both are Republicans.