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Opinion

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Our View

Researchers give spotted owls a boost

Federal wildlife managers and researchers appear to have solved at least part of the riddle of how to save the northern spotted owl.

You will recall that more than 30 years ago the owl was protected as “threatened” under the federal Endangered Species Act. Its numbers were shrinking. All that managers knew at that time was that it nested in the nooks and crannies of old-growth trees. To keep the owl’s numbers from shrinking faster, many of the old-growth federal forests in the Pacific Northwest were declared off limits to timber harvest.

Along the way, the northern spotted owl became the poster child for all that is wrong with the ESA. The timber industry was sacrificed, causing deep wounds to the economy and the loss of jobs in the woods and the mills, yet spotted owl numbers continued to shrink.

More research was clearly needed.



Tom Kogut/USFS

A northern spotted owl in Washington state. Researchers found that removing barred owls helped spotted owl populations.

Was the owl’s survival solely dependent on protecting old-growth forests, or were other factors involved?

When scientists took a close look, they found another cause for the spotted owl’s problems: the barred owl.

A cousin of the spotted owl, the barred owl is not native to the Pacific Northwest. It out-competes spotted owls and takes over their range. As a result, barred owls were contribut-

ing to the downfall of the spotted owl even after old-growth logging was severely reduced.

Wildlife managers came up with an experiment. They would get rid of barred owls in an effort to take pressure off the spotted owl.

That experiment appears to have worked. A federal study last year found that spotted owl populations stabilized where the barred owls were removed. But where the barred owls remained, the spotted owl population decreased by 12% a year.

This is a major breakthrough for wildlife managers around the region. Though the nearly decade-long study is over, wildlife managers now know how to help the spotted owl: get rid of barred owls.

But another interesting thing has happened. Instead of acknowledging the success of the barred owl removal efforts, some in the environmental community seem disappointed. So disappointed, in fact, that they have gone to court to get a judge to rule

that logging and other factors, not the barred owl, were the primary cause of the spotted owl’s problems.

They argued that areas with no spotted owls should still be protected from logging, and that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service needed to do more environmental studies even after doing an environmental impact statement and an environmental assessment.

Follow the science. We hear that a lot these days, as special interests and politicians cherry pick scientific studies to back up their narrative. They trumpet the “science” they like and ignore the rest.

In the case of the northern spotted owls, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals was able to see through the paper-thin arguments of the environmental group and acknowledge the successes that came from getting rid of barred owls. Instead, the environmental group wanted to stop logging.

It’s as though they care more about the trees than the spotted owls.

Our View



A covered wagon brought settlers to the West. Now some Western farmers and ranchers are heading east.

A wake-up call to our national leaders from a Western rancher

Fifteen years ago, Family Farm Alliance leaders began ramping up efforts to convey the growing concerns many had with what they were seeing happen across the West. Agricultural water supplies were being reallocated to meet growing urban and environmental water demands.

We started asking our political leaders pointed questions that we thought demanded answers. At what point will too much agricultural land be taken out of production? Do we want to rely on imported food for safety and security? We pointed out to policymakers that Europeans, who have starved within memory, understood the importance of preserving their food production capability. They recognized it for the national security issue that it is.

And some of those countries still do.

Earlier this month, Business Post reported that all farmers in Ireland will be asked to plant some of their land in wheat, barley and other grains, as part of emergency plans being drawn up by the government to offset a predicted food security crisis in Europe amid Russia’s ongoing assault on Ukraine.

The Global Agricultural Productivity (GAP) Report in 2010 first quantified the difference between the current rate of agricultural productivity growth and the pace required to meet future world food needs. That report predicted that total global agricultural output would have to be doubled by the year 2050 to meet the food needs of a growing global population.

There was for a long time an inborn appreciation and awareness by our own policy leaders for the critical importance of a stable food supply. Now, it appears that many simply assume that food is something that comes from the local grocery store. Our arguments in support of Western irrigated agriculture have in recent years been drowned in a flood of commentary from far-away critics who downplay and even criticize the importance of using water to produce affordable and safe food and fiber.

Politicians, activists, and the media appear to favor another message: climate change is destroying the planet, and we must take immediate and drastic action to halt it.

Meanwhile, the more pressing need to produce 50% more food worldwide in the coming decades to fill the looming global “food gap” is hardly mentioned at all.

GUEST VIEW
Patrick O’Toole



At a time when the future of Ukraine’s ability to help feed the outside world is at risk, the world’s best producers — Western irrigators — are watching their water flushed to the sea to purportedly help fish populations. Decades of empirical evidence has failed so far to show a positive response from those targeted fish to such water shifting schemes. Meanwhile, our ability to increase food productivity is further diminished.

The grim global hunger conditions we once expected to encounter in 2050 may now hit us a decade ahead of schedule.

The U.S. needs a stable domestic food supply, just as it needs a stable energy supply. As we teeter on the brink of world war, that stability becomes even more pressing.

Earlier this month, the Family Farm Alliance released a white paper that further outlines the insanity of the current situation, where our government is taking actions to withhold water from the world’s best food producers, at a time when global food shortage looms. I encourage you to download it and read further.

Western irrigated agriculture is a strategic national resource, and the role of the federal government in the 21st century should be to protect and enhance that resource. There may never be a better time than now for thoughtful and courageous leaders to stand up and shout down the critics and back seat drivers who don’t have a single minute’s worth of experience in the Western water arena.

If not now, when? If not us, who?

At the Family Farm Alliance, we will continue our efforts to ensure Western irrigated agriculture continues to play a vital role in feeding our nation, while keeping our rural communities and the environment healthy.

At a time of unprecedented change, one certainty holds firm and true — our nation’s most valuable natural resource must be preserved.

Patrick O’Toole is president of the Family Farm Alliance, which advocates for family farmers, ranchers, irrigation districts and allied industries in 17 Western states.

The Oregon Trail is a two-way street

The political leadership in the West needs to take note of the growing number of farm families that are picking up stakes and moving east.

In the 1840s, white settlers from east of the Mississippi River started making the arduous journey west, pushing up the Oregon Trail to the Pacific Northwest.

Others followed the trail to Fort Hall in present-day Idaho, then turned southwest on the California Trail to reach the gold fields of the Sierra Nevada and the farmland of the Central Valley.

Land was cheap and opportunity was within relatively easy grasp. The West offered fewer restrictions than were in place in the established eastern communities.

Many longtime farm and ranch families proudly point to their pioneer heritage.

But over the last decade or so, there’s been a small but growing number of farm families picking up stakes and moving east of the coastal states to escape tough business climates.

It’s a reverse Oregon Trail of sorts, with modern day emigrants moving to Idaho, Montana, the Plains and the Midwest.

While it can hardly be described as a mass exodus, people are noticing an uptick in the number of farm operations moving east.

“People have talked about moving for years and years, but now people are actually doing it,” said Ryan Jacobson, manager of the Fresno County Farm Bureau in California. “Statistically, it’s still probably a blip on the radar. But it’s

crazy that it’s actually happening.”

Farmers cite several reasons for moving: seeking less crowded places; political concerns; COVID protocols; estate taxes, regulations and associated costs; opportunities for expansion; “climate migrants” fleeing drought; and farmers seeking more secure water supplies.

The common thread is that farmers and ranchers are moving to places where they believe their businesses, and families, can better thrive.

The tax and regulatory climate on the West Coast has made it increasingly difficult for family farming operations.

Carbon policies have made fuel more expensive. COVID regulations have reduced the availability of labor, and thus have reduced yield while increasing costs.

State legislatures have grown openly hostile to agriculture, proposing gross receipt tax schemes that would turn the already precarious economics of farming on its head.

They have adopted alternative energy policies that encourage converting farmland into wind and solar energy facilities. They’ve proposed increasing riparian buffers. They have restricted common pesticides, herbicides and fumigants.

Most farmers can’t pick up and leave. But, they can sell out to bigger operations.

Through increased regulation and legislation, state governments will hasten the consolidation of the industry, and the ruin of the rural communities that depend on a viable population to thrive.