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Opinion

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Our View

Bring on the plague of lawyers

From the days of Moses, the image of a plague of locusts has been well established in the human psyche.

After losing 10 million acres to insects last year, Eastern Oregon farmers and ranchers are bracing for another damaging infestation of grasshoppers and Mormon crickets.

What could be worse than ravenous insects rolling across the range? Ravenous insects with lawyers.

Grasshoppers are voracious eaters, and having eight or more per square yard is considered enough to cause economic damage on rangeland.

According to the Oregon Department of Agriculture, 15 to 20 grasshoppers per square yard spread out over a 40-acre field of alfalfa will eat 1 ton of hay per day, and seven grasshoppers per square yard over 10 acres can eat the equivalent of one cow feeding throughout the season.

Todd Adams, survey coordinator for ODA's Eastern Oregon Field Office in



Capital Press File

Some lawyers claim controlling grasshoppers damages the environment.

Hermiston, said the agency is starting to receive reports of grasshoppers hatching, including at higher elevations near Jordan Valley along the Oregon-Idaho border.

"In Jordan Valley, the only thing left was sagebrush," Adams said of last year's outbreak.

The Oregon legislature approved a one-time \$5 million allocation for grasshopper and Mormon cricket suppression.

The USDA's Animal and Plant

Health Inspection Service uses diflubenzuron, a growth-inhibiting pesticide, to keep the pests in check. APHIS works not only in Oregon, but throughout the West.

Enter counsel for the grasshoppers.

Two environmental nonprofits — the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation and the Center for Biological Diversity — have filed a lawsuit claiming the USDA's rangeland pesticides program violates the National Environmental Policy Act.

The complaint has asked a federal judge to overturn the agency's authorization of the insecticide program in Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming and to potentially prohibit spraying while the environmental impacts are reconsidered.

"APHIS's widespread, routine application of pesticides on public and private rangelands to manage grasshoppers — many of which never reach economic infestation levels — harms not just grasshoppers but also numerous non-target insect species critical to ecosystem functioning and productivity,"

the lawsuit alleges. "This, in turn, has repercussions for birds, mammals, and plants that rely on these insects for food or pollination."

Killing billions of grasshoppers affects rangeland ecosystems but the USDA hasn't considered long-term benefits from the species, whose outbreaks serve valuable environmental functions while causing "short-term damage" to crops and forage, according to the plaintiffs.

Plaintiffs seek to rob the agency — and the farmers and ranchers it serves — of a flexible platform for controlling grasshoppers and Mormon crickets in real time.

In the Book of Exodus, God unleashes 10 plagues — including locusts — upon Egypt to convince the pharaoh to free the Israelites. Far be it from us to second guess the Almighty, but we can't help but wonder how quickly the Hebrews would have been on their way to the promised land had the first plague been of lawyers bearing lawsuits.

Our View



Idaho Power Co.

Idaho Power Co. crews maintain a cloud seeding generator in the mountains above Garden Valley, Idaho. The utility's effort adds about 1 million acre-feet to the state's water supply.

The seed of an idea to get more water

Utilities, irrigation districts and state governments in parts of the West have for years been supplementing their water supplies. They've done it by seeding the clouds. Where the conditions are right, they have generated upward of 15% more snowmelt, helping to fill streams and rivers, irrigate fields and replenish aquifers.

Cloud seeding is a complicated process. It involves studying the weather patterns to determine whether more water can be coaxed from the clouds by "seeding" them with substances such as silver iodide. Mountain-based generators and airplanes are used for the seeding.

Doing that is not without controversy. Some experts sniff that in Oregon experiments decades ago the additional snow generated by cloud seeding was less than impressive and not statistically significant. What's 10% more snow when so much snow and rain inundates much of the region? they concluded at the time.

That was before drought and climate change became a part of the weather lexicon. In an era when farmers and ranchers — and everyone else — are grasping for every drop of water, some people say 10% more water runoff can sound pretty good.

Mike Britton is one of those people. As the executive manager of the North Unit Irrigation District in Central Oregon, he has seen agriculture in his region drying in the past several years. Less snow and rain in the winter have failed to fill reservoirs and left farms and ranches parched in the summer. This year, they will receive 25% of the water they need.

Britton is asking a simple question: Could

his irrigation district in particular and Oregon farmers in general benefit from seeding clouds as they roll across the Cascade Range all winter?

His is a legitimate question that deserves an answer. Scientists could set up experiments using the latest technology to determine what benefit, if any, could be derived from cloud seeding.

After all, cloud seeding is routinely done in Idaho, California, Nevada and Colorado. In Idaho, for example, cloud seeding adds 1 million acre-feet of water a year to the overall supply.

In this space, we have also commented on the need to consider other means of managing the state's water supply. The Columbia River, one of the great rivers of North America, borders the state on the north. It certainly could supply water to Central Oregon and other parts of the West.

Mountain lake taps could be created that would add to the water supply in the summer and replenish themselves naturally in the winter. As an added benefit, they could generate clean hydropower.

Now is the time to study these and other tools that we in Oregon and other states will need to rebuild and maintain the region's water supply.

There will be no single silver bullet for the region's water supply problems. It will take an array of technology and management tactics.

But until we take a thoughtful, science-based look at all of them, including cloud seeding, we won't know the answer to which techniques are most effective.

Working together, we can have healthy rivers and a healthy economy

Seven years ago, when the ocean temperatures in the Pacific were in a periodic cooler cycle, NOAA Fisheries reported the most productive decade of fish runs since recordkeeping began at Bonneville Dam in 1938.

"The success of this fall chinook run reflects the region's commitment and the collaborative spirit that has made it possible," said Paul Lumley, executive director of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission.

Warmer ocean temperatures and discouraging returns followed. Cooler waters recently have brought some improvement. The collaborative spirit and commitment remain vital. Breaching the dams won't get us there with consequences dire for our farms, our communities, and our ability to provide bountiful crops to feed a hungry nation and the world.

Farmers have worked hard to meet the challenge of producing bountiful crops while reducing water-borne soil erosion 85% and helping improve air quality, too — reducing wind-blown dust six-fold and reducing stubble burning 22-fold.

Moving what we now move by the Snake River waterway would require 5 million more gallons of diesel fuel. Expensive, to be sure, but even more costly to our environment. The EPA Emissions Lab reports that tugs produce 80-85% less hydrocarbons than trains or trucks, far less carbon monoxide and nitrous oxide, too.

Railroads cannot handle the load they have today, much less several million more tons of crops and nutrients to nourish them. We'd be asking that of our rail system should the lower Snake River dams be breached. Deputy Agriculture Secretary Dr. Jewel Bronaugh describes a system currently in disarray: "Increasingly unreliable railway service is pushing American farmers and ranchers to the breaking point. ... When railroads charge unreasonable rates and provide poor service, farmers struggle to make ends meet, consumers pay higher prices at the grocery store and the

GUEST VIEW
Alex McGregor



United States becomes less competitive on the global market."

Scientists at the NOAA Fisheries Science Center, in a peer-reviewed 2021 study, warn of the biggest challenge salmon face — potential future losses of 90% of the fish at sea from long-term warming of the ocean.

"It's horrendous," lead author Lisa Crozier stated. "I wish I had a magic answer ... but it's the reality of where we are right now with the amount of CO2 we have pumped into the atmosphere." We can, and must, do better than that.

The substantial investment Congress made in its infrastructure package for salmon offers hope — \$2.8 billion for habitat restoration, hatcheries, culvert replacement, and most importantly, research.

With survival through the hydro-system already high, fisheries ecologist Crozier puts "more faith in actions like improving coastal habitat, reducing species that both prey on chinook and those that compete with them for resources, including more abundant hatchery salmon and steelhead, and slowing climate change."

We agree with her that "the goal is for people to come together and look at holistic solutions." By doing so, we can make real progress through science, hard work and a shared goal to help our iconic Northwest fish while keeping our economy strong. Working together we can build upon a shared commitment and collaborative spirit, as Paul Lumley of the Inter-Tribal Fish Commission put it several years ago. As I noted at the outset, we can have healthy rivers and a healthy economy. We should accept nothing less.

Alex McGregor is a rancher, wheat grower, former college professor (Whitman and Washington State University) and chairman of The McGregor Company. He is based in Colfax, Wash.