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Opinion

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Our View

Forget the map, start developing a better plan for managing public forests

The folks at the Oregon Department of Forestry have retracted their new multi-million-dollar map identifying 80,000 privately owned parcels of land that are at high risk of burning up during a wildfire. The map was dropped in the laps of landowners with little or no consultation about what it may mean in the way of higher insurance rates and other impacts.

The map apparently skipped over the fact that the primary threat to privately owned forests and other land in Oregon is poorly managed publicly owned forests. Some 64% of forestland in Oregon is owned by the state and federal governments. It's on them to make sure those areas are managed in a way that minimizes the threat of wildfire.

Many wildfires start on public forests and grasslands, which have been allowed to build up fuel over the decades. When lightning strikes, or a campfire gets out of control, these tinder boxes take off. If wind is present — and it often is — the fires are driven onto private forests and other properties, even farmland.



Oregon Department of Transportation
Aftermath of the 2020 Riverside Fire near Estacada, Ore.

Poorly designed and maintained power lines are particularly susceptible to wind. When those lines slap together, even more fires can be started.

Even the best-managed private property can be burned if the state and federal government and the power companies aren't doing an adequate job of maintaining their land and facilities.

Ask the folks who were burned out of house and home in the Santiam Canyon or the many other areas that have been torched by wildfires in recent years.

Most private land is well-managed. It has to be, because the owners depend on it for their livelihoods and

lifestyles. They care.

It's the publicly owned land that has been the problem for decades. It was unmanaged, or poorly managed, on the theory that it was in some way sacrosanct and that logging was bad and doing nothing was good.

Only now — after some of the worst wildfire disasters in state history — are managers getting the message they they have to step up and do a better job.

Though “treating” and prescriptive burning of forests is a start, an overall game plan that would plot defensive areas and strategies that help firefighters stop or control wildfires is also desperately needed.

The state and federal governments need to come up with another map and identify the public forest land most in need of thinning, treatment, prescriptive burning, fire breaks or logging and get to work.

And yes, they need to protect those precious birds and other critters listed under the Endangered Species Act. But they also have to recognize that leaving vast swaths of habitat unmanaged and vulnerable to massive wildfires leaves those species in

danger of incineration.

Ironically, some environmental groups are also to blame for blocking or delaying treatment and logging projects by running to court. They believe they are doing the protected species and the forests a favor by backseat driving forest and wildlife management.

A word about climate change. The Capital Press has been reporting on climate change for nearly two decades. This is not something that just happened when politicians discovered it among their talking points. It is happening and scientists continue to study it to gain a better understanding of it. It should also be noted that the climate has always changed, only the pace of change is different.

Politicians at the state and federal level seem to get hung up on long-term solutions that will slow climate change over decades or longer. In the meantime, they have to deal with the here and now of climate change by better managing public forests and grasslands to make sure they do not burn — and take private property, forests and grasslands with them.

Our View



An aerial view of Hiday Poultry Farms LLC in Brownsville, Ore. It raises chickens for Foster Farms.

Foster Farms

If farms pass regulatory muster, let them operate

Three new, large-scale chicken farms have been proposed in Oregon's Mid-Willamette Valley, and face opposition from neighbors and environmental groups.

Members of the industry say the farms are needed to make up for lost production as more growers have retired in recent years, and to keep up with Americans' appetite for chicken.

However, the proposals have neighbors worried about potential impacts, including air and water pollution, odor and increased traffic on the rural roads.

We are sympathetic to the neighbors' concerns. We would have questions, too. But, under the current regulatory scheme and Oregon's right-to-farm law, these farms seem to pass muster.

Traditionally, we have supported farms of all shapes and sizes that meet their legal obligations.

We find the term “factory” farm to be pejorative, but there's no arguing that these facilities look different than many other farming operations.

J-S Ranch, for example, plans to build 11 barns near Scio, each measuring 39,120 square feet. In all, that's just short of 10 acres under roof. Once at capacity, the farm will raise six flocks a year, each with up to 580,000 chickens for processor Foster Farms. That's 3.48 million birds a year.

These aren't Grandpa's chicken coops, but they represent how commercial flocks are raised, and have been raised for years in the Willamette Valley.

The Northwest Chicken Council says there are 26 growers with 151 barns in the Willamette Valley. Collectively, they raise more than 25 million

chickens each year.

Modern technology and state-of-the-art ventilation systems minimize impacts such as odor from commercial poultry farms, while providing the perfect environment for chickens. All of this production seems to be taking place without any serious issues.

At least so far.

Farmers Against Foster Farms is leading a spirited offense against the proposed chicken farms. Its arguments are all about what could happen if the farms are allowed to be built. The farms could smell, could pollute nearby rivers, could exploit groundwater rules, could create burdensome traffic, could impact other farming operations.

Many farms come with their own smells, sounds, dust and activity that can be bothersome to neighbors. Oregon's right-to-farm law protects normal and lawful farming practices on land zoned for farming.

Owners of neighboring farms have recourse under the same law if the chicken farms damage their operations.

It's up to Oregon regulators to ensure the farms meet environmental and animal welfare concerns before they are issued the necessary confined animal feeding operation permit. J-S Ranch has received that permit, and state agencies have denied a request from opponents to reconsider.

Opponents say the rules surrounding these types of farms need to be strengthened, and there are politicians studying the issue.

In the meantime, if these farms clear the existing regulatory hurdles, they should be allowed to operate.

Farm Workforce Modernization Act will help rein in inflation

The cost of gas and groceries has gone through the roof, and it's hardworking Americans who are — quite literally — paying the price. Fortunately, I have legislation that would tamp down the runaway costs of food: the Farm Workforce Modernization Act.

A recent study conducted by Texas A&M found that H-2A reforms and an increase of a legal workforce would significantly lower costs of meat, poultry, eggs, dairy and produce, not to mention lower inflation, lower unemployment, and higher average wages.

The Farm Workforce Modernization Act, which has now passed the House twice and awaits consideration by the Senate — addresses labor shortages and ensures we have a legal and reliable workforce for all of agriculture by streamlining the existing H-2A program and establishing a new employment- and merit-based program to ensure that not only are agriculture workers in the United States legally, but that they remain law-abiding and continue to contribute to our farms, ranches, local communities and economies.

We already know that by ensuring a legal and reliable agricultural workforce, we can secure our food supply, strengthen our national security, and avert disaster. Now, we have the data to prove that we will also reduce food costs for all Americans and raise wages and reduce unemployment for American workers by creating value-added, upstream jobs for Americans.

Americans are struggling to make ends meet as the cost of living continues to rise. Meanwhile, agriculture producers across the country are facing a labor shortage crisis, and I don't use the word “crisis” lightly. As a lifelong farmer, former director of agriculture for Washington state, and current chairman of the Congressional Western Caucus, I understand the vested interest we share in sup-

GUEST VIEW
Rep. Dan Newhouse



porting our agriculture producers. And a lack of labor, combined with the Biden administration's burdensome regulations and inflationary spending, is severely impacting rural communities and the millions of Americans who rely on them for a strong food supply chain.

Farmers are not strangers to difficulty — we have faced similar challenges in the past, and yet we still have stepped up to the plate to feed our country and the world. These challenges remain and we will continue to face them — but we cannot do it alone. We need to implement policies that boost domestic production of energy and food, protect our vital resources, keep food grown in the United States, and keep the grocery store shelves stocked. Enacting policies that support our domestic food supply chain will ensure that the American people can pay lower prices and face more certainty when they head to the grocery store.

And that starts with the Farm Workforce Modernization Act.

Passing my legislation means we can reform our broken immigration laws and ensure that those who wish to pursue a legal pathway or come to our country to contribute to our agriculture industry are able to do so. It means we can protect our communities, strengthen our national security and secure our southern border, while recognizing the contributions of immigrants and bolstering our local economies, producers, and small businesses. And it means we can secure our food supply and ensure our families can afford the groceries they need.

So, what are we waiting for?

Dan Newhouse represents central Washington in the U.S. House.