

MY OPINION FROM BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR

The promise of community

BY CHRIS BRATT

At the beginning of this new year, our nation and the world remain in the midst of huge environmental, economic and social calamities. Throughout each day, we're bombarded by the news of ongoing and immediate disruptive problems. There are reports of war, murder, mayhem, racism, unemployment, poverty, inequality, natural disasters and environmental degradation, to name just a few. Daily, our brains are filled with distressful or harmful events from an ever-expanding selection of electronic devices and media outlets.

Trying to understand each grueling crisis and then trying to think or do something about it has become a seemingly impossible task. It's increasingly more difficult when self-righteous, well-paid pundits continually make false assumptions and interpretations with scant information on every reported tragedy. With these frustrations at all levels of our society, it's no wonder that citizens are stressed and having trouble separating fact from fiction and nonsense from reality. It seems our civilized world is becoming a fearful place without a long-term plan for a peaceful future that we and all nations can embrace.

I've come to the conclusion that if people want to bring some sanity back into their lives and avoid becoming

overly cynical about our government's questionable decisions, they can have some influence and success in solving knotty problems right here on the community and regional level. Commenting on hot-button issues like climate change, free market growth, green energy vs. fossil fuels, or national forest policies with politicians and agencies is definitely a good practice to continue, but it seldom leads to an individual's concerns being considered. On the other hand, southern Oregon has a long history of using local issues to bring about change at a much higher level.

Right here in southern Oregon is where many big changes in federal agency accountability got started, and important victories have been won in the areas of forest management and pesticide use. Our local issues are microcosms of unresolved larger policies and actions in many other places around the world. We have tackled many of these unsettled major questions with positive results. Local residents and groups will continue to have a profound influence on issues related to human rights, use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), pipeline construction, forest management, and protection of natural resources.

Following is a good example of one local person who successfully

spoke out against federal herbicide use on public forestland when no tests for serious adverse health effects had been done on the pesticides slated to be sprayed throughout the region.

Phyllis Cribby was a trained nurse who worked in South Vietnam during the war helping local villagers with nursing and educational services. She returned to her home in Grants Pass in the 1970s with a raised awareness about the underlying and undisclosed problems connected with using pesticides in our environment. Phyllis centered her attention, energy and expertise on exposing the long-term and chronic health effects linked to pesticide use and exposure in the local forests and on local farms. She worked tirelessly to protect the people, waters and lands when most residents in southern Oregon knew nothing about the adverse effects of using these toxic chemicals.

Phyllis was a founding member of several environmental organizations. She worked for over three decades with groups like Southern Oregon Citizens Against Toxic Sprays (SOCATS), Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides (NCAP), and Headwaters (a forest protection group). In 1984, Phyllis (along with other participants) was instrumental in getting a sweeping injunction against all spraying

of herbicides on public lands managed by the US Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). This court victory was the highlight of Phyllis' environmental work. There has been limited or no spraying of herbicides in the public forests nationwide since that time.

I don't expect everyone to be as dedicated to a local cause as Phyllis was, but we do need more citizen and community involvement if we are going to influence decisions on complex controversial problems. The more recent debate and voter approval of the GMO crop ban in Jackson County shows another successful example of local people working together for important reform.

Join the many good neighbors, scientists, artists and nonprofit organizations prevalent in our community and volunteer your expertise. There is no better way to avoid the hysteria and get reenergized. We can no longer remain just spectators when confronted by important questions relevant to our communities.

If you think I am overenergized, let me know.

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Chris Bratt

Another smoky summer? Count on it!

BY REX GAROUTTE

The past couple of summers have had us choking on forest-fire smoke for weeks at a time. Although we've had several small fires locally, thanks to the Oregon Department of Forestry and local firefighters, these fires lasted only a few days. The fires that keep choking us are large fires in remote areas. Given that much of our economy is tourism-based, these fires have had a serious negative impact.

Although the number of fires has decreased in our area, their size has increased. The history of federal land management helps us understand why.

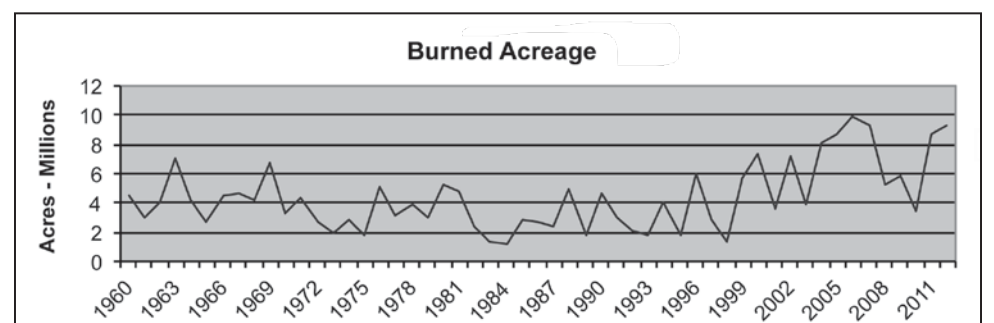
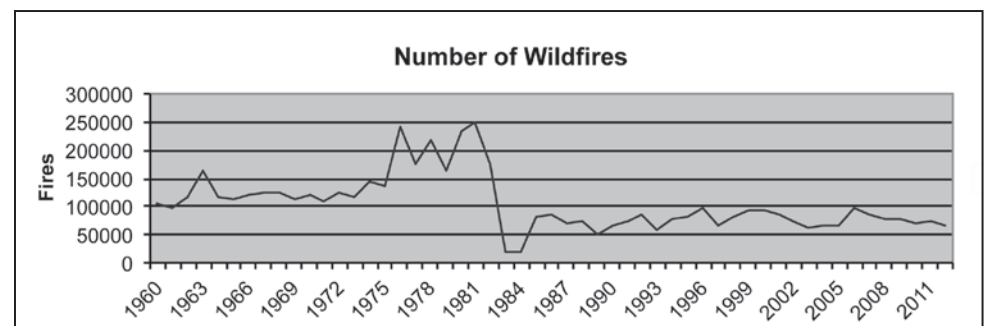
After the Great Fire of 1910, the fledgling forest service adopted the "Out by 10:00" fire strategy: that any fire should be extinguished by 10 am the next day. This policy remained in effect until 1968 for the National Park Service (NPS) and 1978 for the US Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). So why did it change?

In 1964, the NPS, researching the decline in sequoia trees in King's Canyon

and Sequoia national parks, determined that fire was key to the health of a sequoia forest. Concurrent research by the USFS determined that pine forests also benefited from wildfires.

In 1976 the Federal Land Policy and Management Act changed fire policy from containment to management, allowing a wildfire to burn until it was about to jump off federal lands. Twenty years later the Act was amended to include prescribed fires (fires deliberately set to reduce fuels), protection of critical habitat, and containment for wildfires within a wildland-urban boundary.

The history of land use on federal lands also helps us understand the current trend towards fewer but larger wildfires. From the late 1950s to 1992, timber harvested from federal lands was 14 percent of total US production, peaking in 1987 at 17 percent. By 2000, that production was down to two percent, mainly due to environmentalist litigation. It is still at two percent today.



Graphs above courtesy of Rex Garoutte.

With the passage of the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act, the job of BLM went from managing federal lands for the public to protecting the land from the public. New regulations included the power to keep the public off the land, resulting in a dramatic decrease in wildfire frequency by 1983.

Reduction in logging is the key to the increase in wildfire acreage. Logging creates a fire barrier that keeps a wildfire contained. Because most logged forests regenerate in 40 years and there has been little logging since 1994, there is both more fuel to burn and no new fire barriers.

The worst wildfires locally—at least

eight within a 75-mile radius—started in or near wilderness or monument areas. A burned forest is no guarantee against further fire in the area and, in fact, encourages wildfires.

The conclusion from the history is that to keep our skies smoke free we should do prescribed burns in wilderness areas and some logging in non-wilderness areas to create firebreaks.

Can we make this happen? Not until we can reduce the influence of the "Environmental Triad" on public policy—but that's another article.

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More information on fire history

- <http://wildland-fires.findthedata.com/>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_wildfire_suppression_in_the_United_States
- perc.org/sites/default/files/Forest%20Policy%20Up%20in%20Smoke.pdf
- www.fs.fed.us/psw/publications/documents/psw_gtr158/psw_gtr158_01_vanwagtendonk.pdf
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- <http://perc.org/blog/forest-service-timber-harvests-not-what-they-used-be>