

Oregon's man of the hour

One of the most progressive lawmakers in a conservative U.S. Senate, Jeff Merkley is separating himself from the pack in the fight against global warming, the housing crisis and political corruption

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U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley has made a big splash in his eight years in the Senate. One of the Senate's most progressive lawmakers, he made headlines when he became the only U.S. senator to endorse Bernie Sanders' bid for the Democratic presidential nomination.

A common thread undergirds many of Merkley's policy positions and statements, whether he is speaking about filibuster reform, the impact of the Citizens United ruling on politics, global warming or income

equality: that our society and political system need to change, and quickly, for the American republic to best serve its citizens.

Among environmentalists, he has become somewhat of a local champion for his strong protest of the lax oversight of oil train travel through the Columbia Gorge,

spurred on by the derailment of an oil train near Mosier in May.

Amanda Waldroupe: *It seems that oil spills and oil train derailments have become commonplace. But if an airplane crashed or another piece of infrastructure failed, it would be deemed unacceptable. Why do you think oil spills seem to get a pass on this?*

Jeff Merkley: Well, I think your analogy is a good one, and it's one I've been using myself. If a commercial jetliner has a problem, all the similar planes are grounded until the problem is fully understood. It's an extraordinarily rare event with oil trains; we've been seeing month after month derailment after derailment. There is no thorough investigation that fully gets to the root of the problem – an application of the remedy before the trains run out again. That's not what's happening. One more derailment, another derailment. That's what we need to change. That's the impetus behind the bill that I just introduced.

A.W.: *Why do you think oil train derailments persist?*

J.M.: I imagine that because they're freight trains and they don't have passengers aboard, they have not been viewed in the same framework. The trains do represent a risk to citizens. With the Mosier derailment, we were very fortunate, because no wind was blowing. If the wind had been blowing toward the schools just across the way, who knows what damage

that might have done. I think one of the reasons that we're way behind on oil train safety is that not that much oil was carried by trains until the last 10 years. What we have seen with the huge increase of oil being produced is that there aren't pipelines to carry it, so it's being carried by trains. In one five-year period, there was a 40-fold increase in trains. It's a relatively new thing to have these unit trains of oil crisscrossing the country.

A.W.: *The Mandate Oil Spill Inspections and Emergency Rules (MOSIER) Act, which you and Sen. Ron Wyden recently introduced, would require the National Transportation Safety Board to investigate every major oil train derailment, clarify the Federal Rail Administration's authority to place moratoriums on train traffic after accidents, and require the Department of Transportation to reduce the amount of volatile gases in the crude oil transported by the trains. Why these three requirements? Is it enough?*

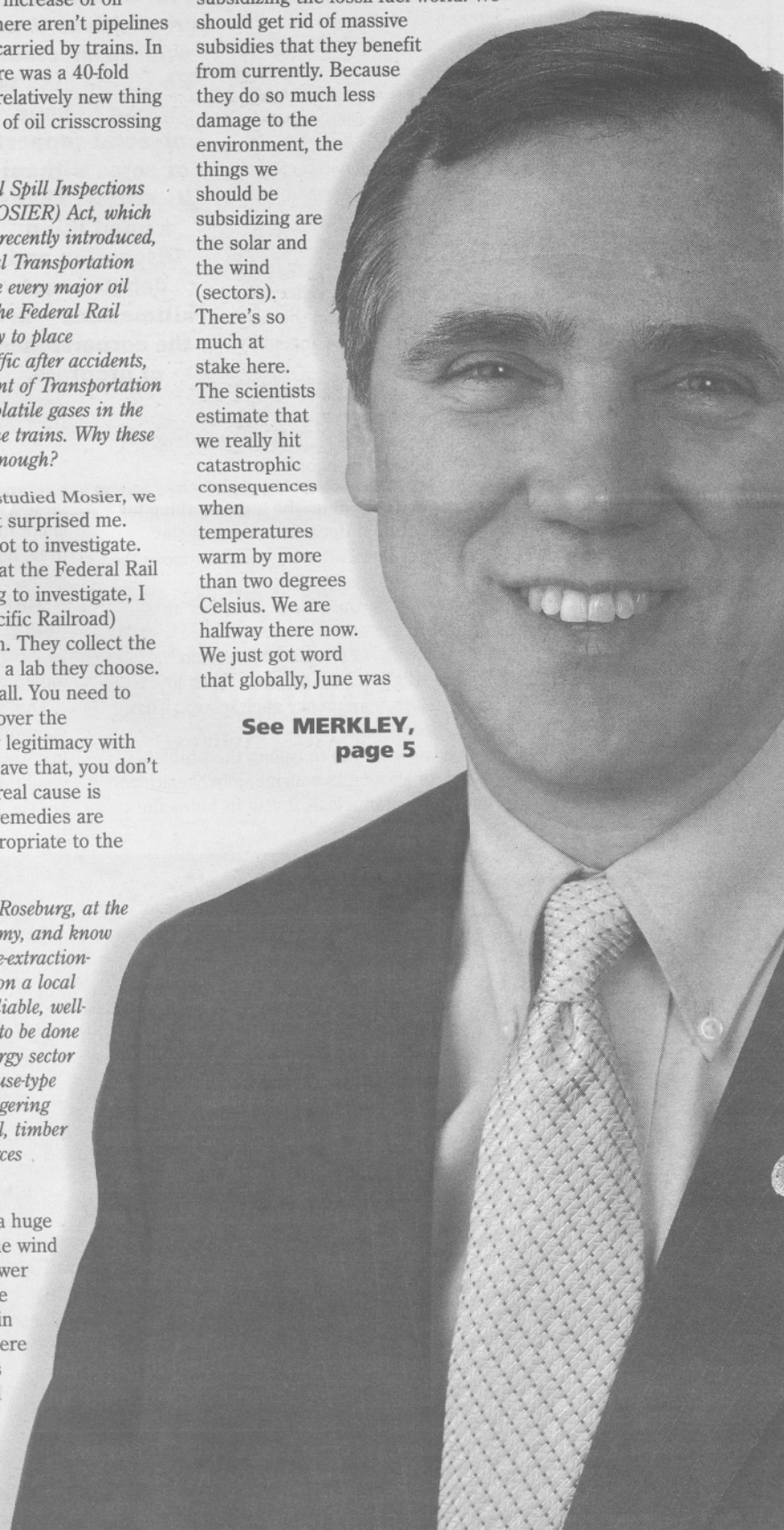
J.M.: As we've really studied Mosier, we found several things that surprised me. First, the NTSB chose not to investigate. Then when I was told that the Federal Rail Administration was going to investigate, I found out (the Union Pacific Railroad) controls the investigation. They collect the evidence; they send it to a lab they choose. That makes no sense at all. You need to have third-party control over the investigation to have any legitimacy with the public. If you don't have that, you don't have any assurance the real cause is understood or that any remedies are undertaken that are appropriate to the problem.

A.W.: *You grew up in Roseburg, at the height of its timber economy, and know the impact that a resource-extraction-based economy can have on a local economy, in providing reliable, well-paying jobs. What needs to be done to turn the renewable-energy sector into that sort of powerhouse-type industry so that these lingering loyalties to fossil fuels, oil, timber and other natural resources decline?*

J.M.: We are seeing a huge growth in the jobs in the wind sector and the solar power sectors. There are more renewable-energy jobs in Wyoming today than there are coal jobs. Coal uses massive machinery and employs very few people. When you're installing rooftop solar or building wind fields, there is a lot

more labor involved. We're seeing a lot of growth in those jobs. We'd see even more if the fossil fuel industry didn't put obstacles in the way. We should no longer be subsidizing the fossil fuel world. We should get rid of massive subsidies that they benefit from currently. Because they do so much less damage to the environment, the things we should be subsidizing are the solar and the wind (sectors). There's so much at stake here. The scientists estimate that we really hit catastrophic consequences when temperatures warm by more than two degrees Celsius. We are halfway there now. We just got word that globally, June was

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