

OPINION

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THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873

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OUR VIEW

Disengaged leadership drove logging lawsuit

Canaries in coal mines don't have anything over young coho salmon when it comes to reacting to adverse environmental conditions by going belly up.

A California study showed, for example, that "Even small amounts of running water — less than a gallon per second — could mean the difference between life or death for juvenile coho," the Columbia Basin Bulletin reported earlier this month.

Water temperature, oxygenation, purity, flow rate and other factors such as availability of hiding places all play a part in how many little coho survive the perilous passage between egg and ocean. They are, in a sense, creatures of the forest, in some cases spending up to two years in freshwater streams and nearby brackish sloughs before venturing out into the sea.

About a dozen years ago, the Oregon Coast Coho Conservation Plan was adopted by the state with active involvement by Gov. John Kitzhaber, who smartly wanted to get out ahead of a potential endangered species quagmire.

But attention wandered. Faced with economic demands for more timber harvest, the Oregon Board of Forestry voted in June 2009 to increase logging in the Clatsop and Tillamook state forests, allowing more timber production on 70 percent of the 518,000 acres. By then out of office, Kitzhaber cautioned that logging more of the state forests would compromise habitat.

System gone adrift

The quagmire of endangered-species contention looms once again with last week's filing of a federal lawsuit by fishing and conservation groups against the state.

Mirroring an earlier threat in February 2014 by the Center for Biological Diversity, that group and several others are mounting exactly the kind of legal challenge that anyone could have predicted.

"Poor logging practices by the Oregon Department of Forestry is causing real harm to the Oregon Coast coho and commercial fishing families who depend on these magnificent fish for their livelihoods," a spokesman for two of the litigants said. "Stronger protections for



AP Photo/Don Ryan

A coalition of environmental and fishing groups has sued Oregon over allowing logging on state forest lands and allege the activity is damaging streams used by coho salmon.

streams to protect the coho ... is decades overdue."

Are the conservation groups right? Or is it true, as some local officials in coastal Oregon have long urged, that the state is failing to authorize enough logging?

As usual, all sides in the controversy make some valid points. All habitat is not created equal, and in the pursuit of sustainable multiple-use of our expansive public forests, it makes sense to prioritize some areas for salmon and others for timber or other priorities. A fully functional system of forest management with ample participation by all segments of the public would stand a far better chance of achieving this balance. This, largely, is what the Oregon Coast Coho Conservation Plan was supposed to achieve. For a while, it had the prospect of succeeding.

As we editorialized in 2010, "Steps initiated by Kitzhaber were somewhat helpful in addressing some of the

more obvious problems faced by these once-thriving salmon runs. Harvests have been brought into better alignment with reality and hatchery practices have been reformed. Local watershed councils have proven to be a powerful force for good, with timber and agricultural interests often taking active roles in improving freshwater habitat."

In too many ways, this system feels like it has gone adrift. In the absence of engaged state leadership, it is no wonder this lawsuit was filed.

Hard compromises

For historians of salmon management, the list of streams and watersheds included in the state's coho plan summons up thoughts of waters that were once alive with salmon.

Starting on the North Coast and stretching southward to California, these include the Necanicum, Nehalem, Tillamook Bay, Nestucca, Salmon,

Siletz, Yaquina, Beaver, Alsea, Siuslaw, Umpqua, Coos, Coquille, Flores, Sixes and some smaller oceanfront tributaries and sub-basins totaling 56 populations. These names speak of a time when salmon fishing and logging each generated thousands of jobs in dozens of communities, some of which are now mere ghost towns.

As more and more people discover Oregon's North Coast, it would be an idle and pointless fantasy to think either salmon or forests will ever be what they were a century ago. Our large public forests can, however, be better managed in ways that support local industries and ecological functions including salmon habitat. The blunt weapon of litigation won't achieve this nuanced result.

What might do so is a regional consensus-based, citizen-driven process of stakeholders hammering out hard compromises. That will require wresting control from remote and disengaged Salem-based agencies. A citizens' initiative,

GUEST COLUMN

Clatsop County leaders should observe democracy

All the uproar in county government the past few months reminds me of the old saying "the more things change the more they stay the same."

Clatsop County's charter hasn't changed in any significant way the last 30 years. After the fall elections are over, the county commission will have changed with a different group in charge. It'll be interesting to see whether county government will then run smoothly. Or not.

For commissioners and managers to follow three basic concepts is still as essential as when I was on the commission 25 years ago.

The first concept involves a willingness to understand and be able to personally accept the managerial form of county government voters overwhelmingly adopted years ago. From my observation over the years, the failure to do that lies at the root of almost all county governance problems. It's important for voters to also appreciate this basic framework of their county government.

The second concept is to accept the commission as a democratic institution.

The three concepts are very simple and probably obvious to everybody. But the human condition apparently makes them hard to deal with.

As for the first concept, it's absolutely essential for commissioners to understand and accept the purpose behind the county charter's managerial system. And that's to

get politics out of county government's daily operation. The basic idea is that professional managers do a better job of supervising hundreds of public employees and managing things than folks who might be politically popular but aren't knowledgeable or experienced in best management practices.

Years ago, county residents got tired of all the waste, inefficiencies and political wrangling when the county's daily operation was managed by three elected commissioners who divided up management chores. The only county residents who benefited were newspaper and radio folks who reported all the inefficiencies and political infighting.

Under the charter, the primary role of commissioners is to represent the community and set governance policies for the manager to follow. If the manager can't perform in a way that's satisfactory to at least three commissioners, then another professional manager needs to be hired.

The system won't run smoothly if individual commissioners interfere in daily operations — even when they think the manager's decisions are terrible. After all, the three or four other commissioners may think the manager's doing a fine job.

Getting politics out of the daily operation of county government is simple to say, but not so simple to accomplish. How commissioners and professional managers go about doing that is the key. And that involves the second concept — how best to deal with the manager form of government.

From America's presidency all the way down to a rural area's county commission, anybody who runs for any elective office has an ego greater than most other folks. Recognizing this human trait is essential. In

fact, as I type that sentence, I think I must have a big ego myself to even make these observations!

In any event, keeping personal egos in check is helpful when five elected people have a wide variety of views based on his or her own life experiences. Wise commissioners know that private suggestions to a commission colleague with a big ego are received much better than public admonitions.

Everybody has their own personalities, and no commissioner is required to "like" another. They just need to respect one another. After all, a commissioner's colleague has gone to a lot of time and effort to get elected too.

No professional manager likes being sandbagged by the boss. And the county manager has five elected bosses. Commissioners need to complain about stuff to the county manager to fix. For a commissioner to try to instruct a department head severely undercuts the manager's authority with the very employee the manager's responsible for. And it's even more obvious a commissioner should never do that to one of the county's regular employees.

And the same principle goes for a professional manager. A county manager is accountable to all five bosses, not just to one or more of his five elected bosses. Like most people in top government positions today, county managers need thick skins. And a wise manager doesn't prove personality clashes among the five elected bosses.

On a personal basis, a professional county manager tries to see to it that the elected bosses agree with his management style and effectiveness. If he can't do that for all five, he tries to satisfy at least three, the majority. And professional managers shouldn't show

disdain for commissioners who vote against his recommendations or for any other reason. A wise manager always remembers who his bosses are. And to always remember the manager isn't The Boss to the elected commissioners who represent the community.

The third concept, to accept that the commission is democratic, is often the toughest for a commissioner to accept. I know that's so, because I was often in the minority when on the commission years ago. It's hard to have lost a vote, especially when you're damned sure you're right. But that's life in a democracy. It's easy to say, but commissioners shouldn't take so much stuff personally. Just enjoy the governing experience few people are so honored to have.

The third concept of commission democracy brings up another obvious troublemaker — tyranny by either the majority or minority. All commissioners should be allowed to have their say under rules the commissioners themselves establish to govern their own deliberations. And no commissioner should try to bypass those rules and disrupt the governance system set up by the county charter. That's such an obvious statement it seems silly to make it. But failure to do that occasionally causes an uproar the newspaper and radio folks quickly report.

Adherence to the three basic concepts behind the charter will ensure a smooth-running county government. Professional managers will then be happy to practice their profession in Clatsop County. And commissioners will feel honored to enjoy the ride they've been elected to experience.

Don Haskell is a retired attorney and former Clatsop County commissioner who lives in Astoria.



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