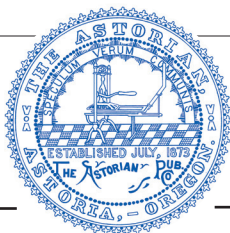


OPINION

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OUR VIEW

Better forestry needed to avoid bad air

Professional consensus management can avoid current political-whipsaw mistakes

Americans have looked down our noses at the Chinese, whose dirty air we've seen on television — dreary gray and brown, shrouding ugly streets in a kind of sickly twilight. How disheartening it is to find ourselves dealing with such ugly air here in the Pacific Northwest this August.

Forest-fire smoke surrounds us. Even the Pacific Ocean, which ordinarily can be counted on for pure breezes, is instead delivering thick fumes as the atmosphere capriciously curves smoke into Western Washington and Oregon from the raging fires in British Columbia and east of the Cascades.

(For the time being, conditions are expected to be better the rest of this week.)

As a result of fires, air-quality monitoring systems in the two states have classified conditions as unhealthy across many thousands of square miles of the Pacific Northwest.

This comes with warnings about limiting the amount of time spent outdoors and curbing physical activities that might cause us to breathe in more smoke. It's a little like being stuck in a smoky tavern with no exit — although diluted forest fire chemicals aren't as injurious as tobacco smoke, thankfully.

It's possible our region hasn't suffered such persistently bad air — especially in non-urban areas — since the

catastrophic Oregon North Coast burns of the 1930s and 1940s, during which much of the Coast Range went up in smoke.

Aside from being grateful for clean-air rules that began curbing industrial air pollution in the 1970s, what should be our response to forest fires and the smoke they cause? If the past several years are anything to go by, developing better strategies will become vital as our continent's climate changes. And although it's safe to say that almost everyone is against smoke, dealing with

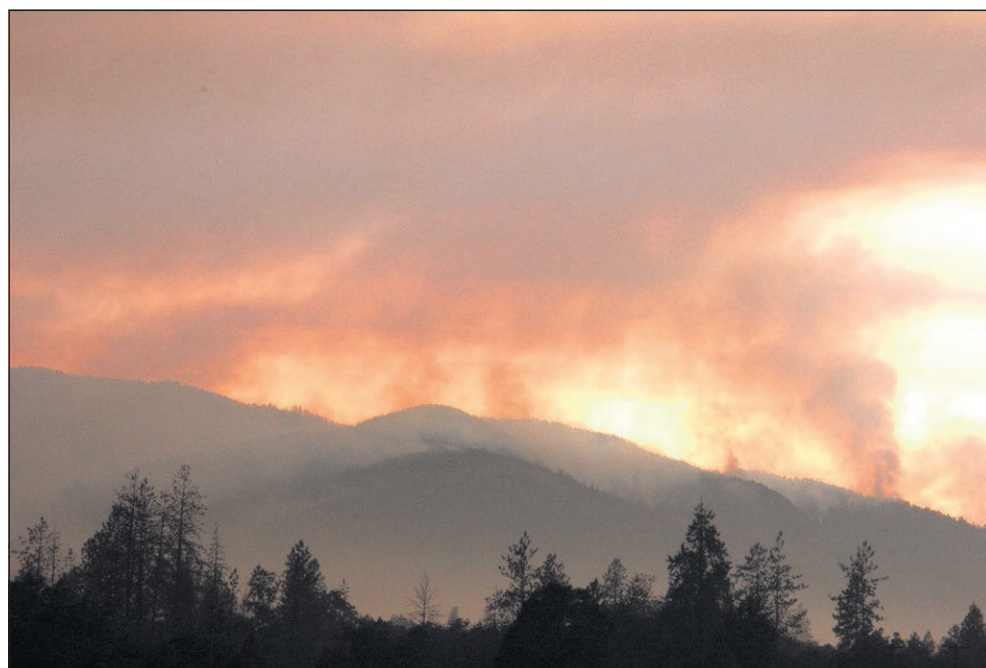
underlying issues will be extremely tricky.

It rushes us headlong into controversies over forest thinning, timber harvests, understory maintenance, controlled burns and how (or even whether) to regulate residential building within the Pacific Northwest's forest interface. All these subjects have evoked expensive lawsuits and destructive political battles. To say that

there is little trust would be an understatement. Circumstances may force the combatants to overcome these differences, or at least spur less-polarized middle-of-the-road citizens to begin mandating smarter decisions.

So when it comes to avoiding dangerously destructive forest fires and the harms they create, what might smarter management look like?

'We in the Northwest don't want to have to get used to having dangerous air. ... We must get ahead of the fires before they get ahead of us.'



Southwest Oregon has become accustomed to summer wildfire smoke, but the problem has spread to the entire Pacific Northwest several times in recent years.

Many solutions are likely to entail seeking and following the advice of professional forest managers, rather than either acquiescing to decisions forced by environmental lawsuits on the one hand, or back-room industry manipulations on the other. Forest policies should be made on a time scale of multiple decades or centuries, and not change with presidential administrations. Neither the environment nor industry are well-served by a tangled-up political mess in which strategic decisions are so hard to make and stick with.

Foresters aren't guaranteed to agree with one another, of course. While there was disagreement within the agency, National Forest Service policies notoriously favored harvest over all other options during much of the 20th century. The same was true of state forestry agencies in the Pacific Northwest. Only with generational change in personnel was there a gradual shift to more

balance between harvest, thinning, conservation and other options. Moving forward in the 21st century, we should insist on carefully designed consensus-based management groups, with mechanisms to protect against political and judicial manipulation.

The answers won't be easy to find or accept. Additional harvest is likely in many cases to be the most affordable way to control fire risk, while providing a useful economic boost to rural areas. Thinning will be more environmentally palatable in other places, but tends to be expensive. Prescribed burns — never popular — will sometimes be the right way to go.

We in the Northwest don't want to have to get used to having dangerous air. Nobody should have to become good at wearing filtration masks, or interpreting air-quality warnings. We must get ahead of the fires before they get ahead of us.

OTHER VIEWS

Excerpts from Oregon newspaper editorials

Corvallis Gazette-Times, on memories of the solar eclipse

What a difference a year makes: This week, we're looking at the gray, dark skies around the mid-valley and cursing the smoke created by the region's wildfires.

But a year ago this week, we gazed into darkening skies and cheered as a total solar eclipse — for many of us, a once-in-a-lifetime experience — worked its way from west to east across Oregon as it started a remarkable journey across the United States.

Maybe you just watched it from your backyard or stepped outside your office, slapped on your pair of eclipse glasses (the one essential fashion accessory from the summer of 2017) and witnessed what turned out to be an astonishing cosmic spectacle: The moon passing across the surface of the sun, plunging the world below into two minutes or so of darkness.

Although it seems odd to say this about a celestial event, the event itself delivered the goods: In fact, it's hard to think of any other event in recent history that generated so much hype beforehand and then managed to live up to the hype.

In fact, no matter your location at about 10:15 a.m. last Aug. 21, during the two minutes of totality, our hunch is that you could hear the gasps and cheers from others. Maybe you joined with the cheers, or maybe you were stunned into silence. You and millions of others might have experienced goosebumps, and it wasn't because the air suddenly seemed (and was) cooler.

Our overuse of the word "awesome" has devalued the word's meaning; it is not "awesome" when the person taking your lunch order gets it right. On that Monday morning, a spectacle so much bigger than any of us gave us a refresher course in the true meaning of "awesome." And that's why those of us lucky enough to see it will carry it with us.

Well, that and our eclipse glasses, which we chose not to recycle.

The next total solar eclipse in the continental United States is scheduled for April 8, 2024; it'll start down in Texas and work its

way up to Maine. We're not planning to make the trip to see the event, but we know people who already are making plans to do so. A little more than a year ago, we might have scoffed at such an ambition. Today, though, as we recall the memories of Aug. 21, 2017 — the way the eclipse looked, sounded, felt — we completely understand the impulse.

Eugene Register-Guard, on PERS debate in race for governor

In this fall's gubernatorial campaign, the candidates, and Oregonians, have an ideal chance to debate in detail the hugely expensive Public Employees Retirement System that is one of the root causes of Oregon's protracted crisis over taxes and public services.

PERS is difficult to talk about for many reasons:

It is complex and the sums of money are so large — and pose such a staggering burden to taxpayers — that they boggle the mind.

Many PERS beneficiaries are defensive. Many critics are vitriolic.

Plus, legal decisions shield current retirees in PERS from virtually all clawbacks or cuts, so any cost-paring must come at the expense of current and future government employees.

One thing is clear, however: without PERS reform, public services in the state will continue to spiral downwards, in the classrooms, on the streets, in the parks, as tax dollars continue to be channeled into PERS when they could be better spent hiring more teachers and police.

GOP gubernatorial candidate Knute Buehler has already issued an ambitious PERS reform plan. Incumbent Gov. Kate Brown has, predictably, pooch-pooed it. Her own PERS plans amount to minor tweaks.

Buehler's plan, on examination, might prove unfair to current government employees, or might not even save much money. Brown's campaign has said overall government-employee compensation — pay, retirement and health benefits — is reasonable and should not be cut. But at this point, that's not the issue. The important element now is to have a full public airing.

Oregon's Democratic leadership over the years has been maddeningly slippery about curbing the costs of the retirement system. That's no surprise given how heavily funded Democrats are by campaign dollars from

public employee unions.

Democrats have offered some modest reforms, some of which were overturned by the courts. And with a strong hold on the governor's office and both chambers of the Legislature, they've declared there's little else of substance to be done about PERS.

Buehler challenges that assertion. It may take an outsider — that is to say a Republican — to get the message across to Oregon's Democratic establishment that public disillusion over PERS, taxes and public services is heading toward a tipping point.

Medford Mail Tribune, on smoke issue from wildfires

It's become monotonous. With only a few brief interludes of favorable winds to clear the smoke, Southern Oregonians go about their daily business in sealed cars and closed-up houses and workplaces, strapping breathing masks to their faces if they must be outside for any length of time.

It's a normal reaction to these conditions to look for a fix. Surely something can be done to limit wildfires and the smoke they produce.

Something can and should be done, but it won't be quick and it won't be cheap.

First, it's important to understand how we got to this point.

Longtime residents remember summers without weeks of choking smoke, a thriving timber industry and reservoirs brimming with water from plentiful winter snowpacks. None of that is coming back, with the possible exception of less-smoky skies — eventually.

While the timber industry was booming, clearcuts were replanted with new trees, which grew into plantations that now help to fuel the fires that plague our region. Decades of active fire suppression prevented the natural, low-intensity fires that burn along the ground, clearing the forest floor while leaving big trees to continue growing. Underbrush — what foresters call "ladder fuels" — now chokes the forests, turning what could have been beneficial fires into the "crown fires" that destroy hundreds of thousands of acres.

At the same time, the climate was gradually changing, with higher temperatures, less rain and snowfall and longer fire seasons. Eight of the 10 hottest summers in Medford have occurred since the Biscuit fire of 2002.

So what's to be done?

The most promising plan was developed

by a coalition of federal agencies, conservationists, business and community leaders, landowners and foresters. The Southern Oregon Forest Restoration Collaborative produced a detailed plan a year ago, called the Rogue Basin Cohesive Forest Restoration Strategy. It calls for mechanical thinning of overgrown forests, coupled with prescribed burning in the fall and spring when weather conditions will keep smoke out of communities as much as possible.

The plan proposes thinning and fuels reduction on 25 percent of the Rogue Basin, or 1.1 million acres, over a period of 20 to 30 years. The group estimates that could reduce wildfire risk as much as 70 percent, while putting 1,700 people to work, directly and indirectly.

Some of those would be logging jobs, but by no means all of them. Much of the landscape that needs to be treated contains little or no commercially valuable timber.

Those areas that do contain merchantable timber could produce enough to approach the annual targets of both the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest and the Medford District of the Bureau of Land Management, all without clearcutting or encroaching on riparian zones. The proceeds could help defray some, but not all, of the cost of thinning and fuels reduction.

The group estimates the work would require up to \$30 million in federal appropriations every year for 20 years. That's a lot of money, but this summer's firefighting costs exceeded \$135 million two weeks ago, with no end in sight. And that doesn't include the secondary costs in lost tourism revenue and destroyed property.

Thinning costs average \$500 to \$600 an acre, with prescribed burning adding more cost. But fighting the Garner fire this month cost \$4,900 an acre.

Congress needs to realize that it's less expensive in the long run to reduce fire risk by restoring forests than to fight the catastrophic fires that result from overgrown, unhealthy landscapes.

That won't mean an immediate end to the smoke we're now experiencing. And there always will be some smoke from prescribed burns in spring and fall, and from the so-called "good fires" that remove underbrush and keep the risk of catastrophic fire low. But doing nothing will only guarantee more years of unbreathable air and hundreds of millions in firefighting costs, not to mention lost lives, property and timber.

Let's get started.