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KATHRYN B. BROWN

Publisher

JENNINE PERKINSON

Advertising Director

DANIEL WATTENBURGER

Managing Editor

TIM TRAINOR

Opinion Page Editor

OUR VIEW

Now is the time for water-rights reform

Enormous splotches of cancer-like drought consuming some of a nation’s most productive agricultural lands: If CIA analysts saw the same thing happening in Africa, Asia or Latin America, they would warn of near-term economic and social upheaval. It’s happening here in America and though nobody is predicting food riots right away, a substantial governmental and personal response is essential.

The U.S. Drought Monitor (droughtmonitor.unl.edu) has been a source of worry for several years but is particularly worrisome this spring. With the exception of Montana and Wyoming, the mainland Western states are on track to repeat the dry pattern of recent years. Now in late March when conditions might usually be expected to be moist, 60 percent of the West has some degree of water shortage — 7.23 percent in the worst, exceptional form of dead dryness. Years of this means that stored water and groundwater are being rapidly depleted. By its definition, NASA warned this month that California is working its way through its last year of water.

Crucial food-growing areas of California and Midwestern states like Kansas are in the grip of conditions that will drive up food prices, putting greater strain on families that already struggle to balance monthly expenses. Affordable food has been one of America’s key advantages. The California Farm Water Coalition points out U.S. consumers pay just 6.2 percent of their disposable income on food, compared to 10.2 percent in 28 other high-income countries. At the same 10.2 percent rate, U.S. families would have to increase the amount they spend on their food budget by almost \$4,000 per year, the coalition’s Mike Wade commented to *The Wall Street*

Journal.

Allocating water in a time of scarcity will stretch the current boundaries of legal ingenuity. Water law is a topic highly peculiar to the U.S. West, a field that has sparked epic lawsuits and actual shootouts. We’re fast coming to a time when this untouchable topic will have to be dealt with. As an Oregon State University Extension crop scientists told *The Oregonian* last week, “At what point does it go from being a dry spell to just having to accept where we are today and where we’re going?”

This crisis is generating a lot of discussion. In Southern Oregon, water users are awaiting congressional authorization of a set of agreements that will help settle water-sharing issues between farms, tribes and wildlife. In California, a venture capitalist and a journalist have proposed a new free market to buy and sell water like any other commodity, rather than narrowly linking specific water to specific land as the law now mandates. Other responses include a Facebook campaign seeking to make vegetable gardening a standard offering in public schools.

Western water was initially parceled out based on whomever first began using it for certain recognized beneficial purposes — usually by 19th century farmers and ranchers, and then eventually by growing cities. Byzantine court decisions and rural politics driven by property-rights philosophies make it astoundingly difficult to effect changes in this system.

Changes must happen. Like requisitioning iron in a time of war, a time is fast approaching when we will be forced to develop ways to get water where it will do the most good. Having these debates now will be the best way to avoid food-price shocks and unnecessarily harsh impacts on private water rights.

60 percent of the West has some degree of water shortage

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.



CONTACT YOUR REPRESENTATIVES

U.S. Senators

Ron Wyden

Washington office:
221 Dirksen Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510
202-224-5244

La Grande office:
541-962-7691

Jeff Merkley

Washington office:
313 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510
202-224-3753

Pendleton office:
541-278-1129

U.S. Representative

Greg Walden

Washington office:
185 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
202-225-6730

La Grande office:
541-624-2400

Governor

Kate Brown

900 Court Street
Salem, OR 97301-4047
503-378-4582

Senator

Bill Hansell, District 29

900 Court St. NE, S-423
Salem, OR 97301
503-986-1729
Sen.BillHansell@state.or.us

Representatives

Greg Barreto, District 58

900 Court St. NE, H-38
Salem, OR 97301
503-986-1458
Rep.GregBarreto@state.or.us

Greg Smith, District 57

900 Court St. NE, H-482
Salem, OR 97301
503-986-1457
Rep.GregSmith@state.or.us

OTHER VIEWS

A little respect for evangelical Christians

One sign of a landmark shift in public attitudes: A poll last year found that Americans approved more of gays and lesbians (53 percent) than of evangelical Christians (42 percent).

That’s partly because some evangelical leaders were intolerant blowhards who give faith a bad name. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson famously blamed the 9/11 terror attacks in part on feminists, gays and lesbians, and doctors who perform abortions. After an outcry, both men backed off.

Today, among urban Americans and Europeans, “evangelical Christian” is sometimes a synonym for “rube.” In liberal circles, evangelicals constitute one of the few groups that it’s safe to mock openly.

Yet the liberal caricature of evangelicals is incomplete and unfair. I have little in common, politically or theologically, with evangelicals or, while I’m at it, conservative Roman Catholics. But I’ve been truly awed by those I’ve seen in so many remote places, combating illiteracy and warlords, famine and disease, humbly struggling to do the Lord’s work as they see it, and it is offensive to see good people derided.

NICHOLAS KRISTOF
Comment

Foster, the son with polio. “Today, I no longer feel like that; I am no longer bitter or resentful.

“If me getting polio meant that thousands of lives were either saved or immeasurably improved by my father’s work, then so be it.”

One of the boys in the pediatric ward when I visited was Abel Jose, a 10-year-old whose malnutrition reduced his resistance and led to a bone infection. That resulted in his left femur breaking and protruding through the skin.

“It’ll be another year before he can walk again,” Foster said, but, without treatment, the boy would likely have died.

With support from the Fistula Foundation, Foster is also repairing obstetric fistulas — devastating childbirth injuries that leave women leaking urine or feces.

Several other evangelical Christians work as doctors and nurses at the hospital, the Centro Evangelico de Medicina do Lubango, or CEML, along with a vast number of Angolan Christians.

The foreigners, Foster included, receive a paltry stipend of \$35,000 a year if they are married, or \$17,500 a year for those who are single.

Most evangelicals are not, of course, following such a harrowing path, and it’s also true that there are plenty of secular doctors doing heroic work for Doctors Without Borders or Partners in Health. But I must say that a disproportionate share of the aid workers I’ve met in the wildest places over the years, long after anyone sensible had evacuated, have been evangelicals, nuns or priests.

Likewise, religious Americans donate more of their incomes to charity, and volunteer more hours, than the nonreligious, according to polls. In the United States and abroad, the safety net of soup kitchens, food pantries and women’s shelters depends heavily on religious donations and volunteers.

Sure, it puzzles me that social conservatives are often personally generous while resisting government programs for needy children, and, yes, evangelicals should overcome any prejudice against gays and lesbians — just as secular liberals should overcome any prejudice against committed Christians struggling to make a difference.

The next time you hear someone at a cocktail party mock evangelicals, think of Foster and those like him. These are folks who don’t so much proclaim the gospel as live it. They deserve better.

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On a recent trip to Angola, the country with the highest child mortality rate in the world, I came across a rural hospital run by Dr. Stephen Foster, 65, a white-haired missionary surgeon who has lived there for 37 years — much of that in a period when the Angolan regime was Marxist and hostile to Christians.

“We were granted visas,” he said, “by the very people who would tell us publicly, ‘your churches are going to disappear in 20 years,’ but privately, ‘you are the only ones we know willing to serve in the midst of the fire.’”

Foster, the son and grandson of missionaries, has survived tangles with a 6-foot cobra and angry soldiers. He has had to make do with rudimentary supplies: Once, he said, he turned the tube for a vehicle’s windshield-washing fluid into a catheter to drain a patient’s engorged bladder.

Armed soldiers once tried to kidnap 25 of his male nurses, and when Foster ordered the gunmen off the property, he said, they fired Ak-47 rounds near his feet. He held firm, and they eventually retreated without the nurses.

Oh, by the way, this is where Foster raised his family.

One son contracted polio; a daughter survived cerebral malaria; and the family nearly starved when the area was besieged during war and Foster insisted on sharing the family rations with 100 famished villagers. This created family tensions at times, but today the kids speak glowingly of their dad.

“For a while, I blamed my dad and his high-risk dedication to others,” said Rob

Nicholas Kristof grew up on a sheep and cherry farm in Yamhill, Oregon. He is a columnist for *The New York Times*. He and his wife, Sheryl WuDunn, share a 1990 Pulitzer Prize for their coverage of the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy movement in China.

YOUR VIEWS

Plass has what it takes for BMCC board

We deserve a person like Susan Plass for the BMCC Board of Education seat for Zone 7. She is all things a board member should be: smart, well informed, hardworking, honest and knowledgeable. She will work to make sure that the decisions that are made are in the best interest of the college and the taxpayers it serves.

When you get your ballot don’t wait, and cast your vote for Susan Plass — you will be well represented.

Keith May
Pendleton

Disrespect for Sundown is shocking

As a former resident of Pendleton (1940s, ’50s and ’60s), I was saddened to read this article regarding fourth-generation descendants of Jackson Sundown adorning his handsome bronze statue in such a disrespectful

manner. It was erected as a tribute to his colorful life, notably:

- the first Indian to compete in the Round-Up;
- as the key character in the novel “Last Go Round” by Ken Kesey;
- at the age of 53 won the world title for saddle bronc riding plus all-around (1916). A folk hero!
- as a friend of the Bishops who established the first Pendleton Woolen Mills — this friendship is said to have been instrumental in the future unique relationship between the Tribes and the Round-Up.

If this partial list doesn’t make the relatives prefer to shine his big belt buckle every day, instead of placing shoddy decor, then I don’t know!

What is next if the city council OKs it? Til Taylor and the other images unique to the Round-Up City?

Show your civic pride and vote “No” on any petitions! (They wouldn’t do it in my day!) Let ‘er Buck!

Loretta (Grove) Lemma
Warrenton, Ore.

LETTERS POLICY

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less on public issues and public policies for publication in the newspaper and on our website. The newspaper reserves the right to withhold letters that address concerns about individual services and products or letters that infringe on the rights of private citizens. Submitted letters must be signed by the author and include the city of residence and a daytime phone number. The phone number will not be published. Unsigned letters will not be published. Send letters to Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801 or email editor@eastoregonian.com.