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OUR VIEW

Megafires are a warning we must heed

It comes as no surprise that August is bringing with it some of the largest wildfires this state has seen in recent history. Even before the season began, those who study, maintain and protect our forests warned it was going to be a hot one.

And yet here we are, scrambling to save homes, animals, even human lives as the tinderbox burns. Because no matter how prepared you are on paper, once the fire is sparked in the woods the best you can do is limit the damage and try to direct its path of destruction.

"Megafires" — destroying 100,000 or more acres, like the Cornett/Windy Ridge fire south of Baker City — are becoming almost common. And fires currently burning in Eastern Oregon have destroyed about 200,000 acres already.

In an Aug. 9 story, *National Geographic* makes numerous thought-provoking points about this problem that is exploding in our backyard:

• "These infernos, once rare, are growing to sizes that U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell describes as 'unimaginable' two decades ago. Five alone have consumed more than five million acres in central Alaska since June. Washington, Oregon, California, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado also experienced their worst wildfires in the past seven years."

• "The main driver is climate change. Rising temperatures exacerbate drought, spread beetle infestations and melt the snowpack earlier. Early snowmelt alone has lengthened the fire season by 70 days since 1970. 'These stresses are going to become more widespread,' says Craig Allen, a U.S. Geological Service forest ecologist in Los Alamos, New Mexico. 'The drought itself is part of the natural variability here. What's different is it's a hotter drought than anything in the Northern Hemisphere in the last thousand years.'"

• "Today, wildfires, on average, burn twice as much land every year now as they did 40 years ago."

• "58 million acres of national forests are at risk for severe fire, but there is only enough funding to clean up 11.3 million acres."

The end result of these colossal blazes is landscapes permanently transformed in terms of both plants and animals. They burn so hot and are so extensive that formerly "native" species no longer find themselves at home. One scientist quoted in the story said that if he wants to continue specializing in the same type of forest, he should plan to move a couple hundred miles north.

What does all this mean? This very dry summer, at least, the answer is that we should be talking about it and more actively including wildfire planning in a wide variety of civic discussions. The debate on climate change cannot be agree to disagree, but instead planning to deal with our changing environment.

If national forests are poorly maintained in terms of mitigating fire risk, might it be safe to surmise that state forests are even less so? Does the fact that Pacific County's forestland in Washington is predominantly owned by large corporations ensure less build-up of flammable debris on the forest floor?

This year's megafires are a strong whiff of things to come as we in the Pacific Northwest learn to cope with warmer temperatures without reliable snowpacks to see us through the summer. Intelligent, appropriately funded counter-measures can help make the difference.

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.

YOUR VIEWS

Money for street repair can be found elsewhere

The Pendleton City Council is caught between a rock and a hard place. If they raise taxes and fees there is a great chance they will kill growth in Pendleton. Growth solves many problems. If they don't raise taxes and fees they need to cut low priority budget items which they failed to do this year. High priority items in the budget are fire, police and streets.

What can be cut? Parks and Recreation takes $2.1 million of general fund resources. If you are a homeowner and need money for major repairs, recreation and vacations are the logical things to cut. A cut of 25 percent of this fund would put us more in line with cities our size.

Next, the chamber of commerce receives a large amount of money from city taxes. I think the chamber should be financed by its membership. We also fund statues and art from the motel room tax. This money would be better spent on street repair so tourists can safely drive to the motel.

So what does this mean for street repair? More than $700,000 per year. This would give us a total of at least $3 million per year for streets.

Vote no on the 5-cent gas tax, it only makes Arrowhead rich and Pendleton poor. The $5 water user fee for street repair has a lot of problems, one of which is that a lot of residents, young and old, walk to and from the grocery store. They do not have a car or do not drive. They would still be charged the fee.

Let's use the money we have instead of raising Pendleton's cost of living higher than it already is. We need to be competitive to attract jobs and industry.

Rex J. Morehouse
Pendleton

Walmart the new giant on the block

"Welcome to your friendly Walmart," the greeter says as you pass through the entry doors. Started in 1962, Walmart now is the largest company in the world, overtaking Exxon/Mobil. 260 million customers, about 11,400 retail stores in 27 countries, and over 2 million employed worldwide.

In fiscal year 2012 Walmart had $444 billion in sales, which is $20 billion more than Austria's GDP. If Walmart were a country it would be the 26th largest economy in the world.

In 2010, CEO Michael Duke made $35 million, which means he makes more in one hour than a full-time employee makes in an entire year.

Now the bad news:

1.) Walmart has moved their purchasing headquarters to China. Up until 2006 they bragged often about being very patriotic and selling American goods.

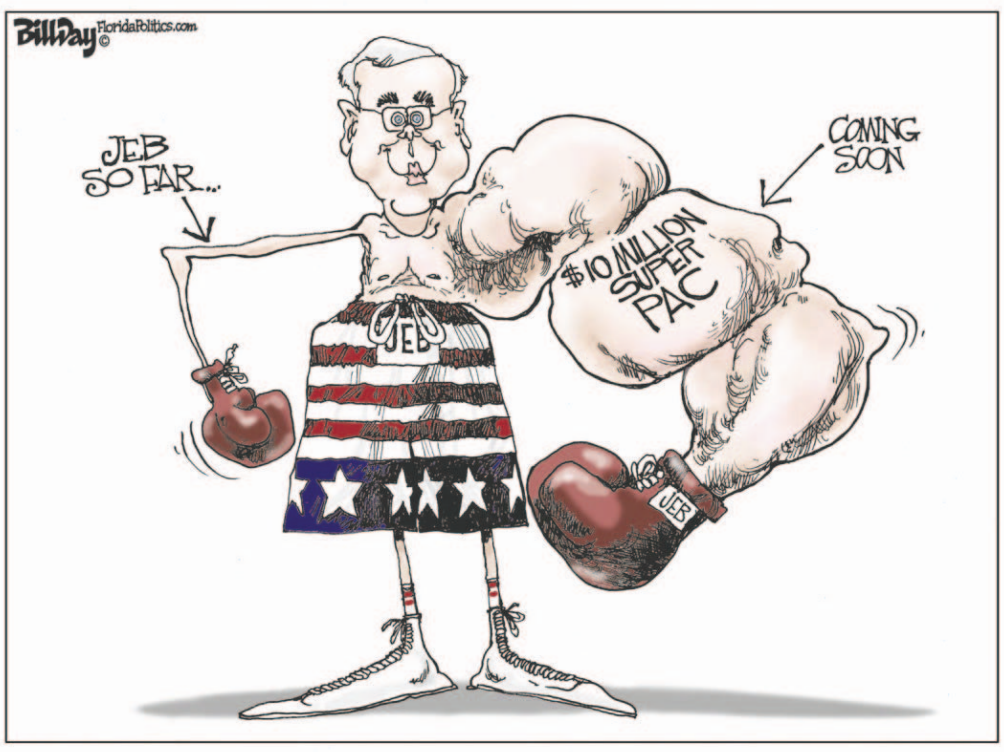
2.) Walmart means welfare to many of their employees. Over half of their full-time employees make less than $25,000 per year resulting in many of these people signing up for welfare and food stamps. That way the U.S. taxpayer picks up the million dollar cost in public assistance while Walmart receives over a billion in tax breaks.

3.) In the midst of an obesity epidemic in the U.S., Walmart makes a big contribution and is said to be responsible for 10.5 percent of the rise in obesity since the late 1980s. Over 60 percent of American adults and about one third of our children and teens are now obese or overweight. Unfortunately, "cheap" often also means processed foods with a lot of salt, sugar and not much food value.

4.) The proliferation of Walmart Superstore openings are said the kill 3 local jobs for every two they create. They are labeled an "economic death star" by small retailers who struggle or are forced out of business trying to compete with Walmart. Walmart reduces retail employment by 2.7 percent in every county they enter, according to the Journal of Urban Economics. After a Walmart store was built in Chicago in September 2006, 82 of 306 small businesses in the surrounding neighborhood had gone out of business by March of 2008.

To be fair, after a great deal of ridicule, protests by employees, and a number of lawsuits, Walmart has recently agreed to raise wages for about 100,000 employees in the U.S.

David Burns
Pendleton



OTHER VIEWS

Republicans against retirement

PAUL KRUGMAN
Comment

Something strange is happening in the Republican primary — something strange, that is, besides the Trump phenomenon. For some reason, just about all the leading candidates other than The Donald have taken a deeply unpopular position, a known political loser, on a major domestic policy issue. And it's interesting to ask why.

The issue in question is the future of Social Security, which turned 80 last week. The retirement program is, of course, both extremely popular and a long-term target of conservatives, who want to kill it precisely because its popularity helps legitimize government action in general. As the right-wing activist Stephen Moore (now chief economist of the Heritage Foundation) once declared, Social Security is "the soft underbelly of the welfare state"; "jab your spear through that" and you can undermine the whole thing.

But that was a decade ago, during former President George W. Bush's attempt to privatize the program — and what Bush learned was that the underbelly wasn't that soft after all. Despite the political momentum coming from the GOP's victory in the 2004 election, despite support from much of the media establishment, the assault on Social Security quickly crashed and burned. Voters, it turns out, like Social Security as it is, and don't want it cut.

It's remarkable, then, that most of the Republicans who would be president seem to be lining up for another round of punishment. In particular, they've been declaring that the retirement age — which has already been pushed up from 65 to 66, and is scheduled to rise to 67 — should go up even further.

Thus, Jeb Bush says that the retirement age should be pushed back to "68 or 70." Scott Walker has echoed that position. Marco Rubio wants both to raise the retirement age and to cut benefits for higher-income seniors. Rand Paul wants to raise the retirement age to 70 and means-test benefits. Ted Cruz wants to revive the Bush privatization plan.

For the record, these proposals would be really bad public policy — a harsh blow to Americans in the bottom half of the income distribution, who depend on Social Security, often have jobs that involve manual labor, and have not, in fact, seen a big rise in life expectancy. Meanwhile, the decline of private pensions has left working Americans more reliant on Social Security than ever.

And no, Social Security does not face a financial crisis; its long-term funding shortfall could easily be closed with modest increases in revenue.

Still, nobody should be surprised at the spectacle of politicians enthusiastically endorsing destructive policies. What's puzzling about the renewed Republican assault on Social Security is that it looks like bad politics as well as bad policy. Americans love Social Security, so why aren't the candidates at least pretending to share that sentiment?

The answer, I'd suggest, is that it's all about the big money.

Wealthy individuals have long played a disproportionate role in politics, but we've never seen anything like what's happening now: domination of campaign finance, especially on the Republican side, by a tiny group of immensely wealthy donors. Indeed, more than half the funds raised by Republican candidates through June came from just 130 families.

> Ordinary Americans want to see Social Security expanded ... Americans in the top 1 percent want to see it cut. And guess whose preferences are prevailing among Republican candidates.

And while most Americans love Social Security, the wealthy don't. Two years ago a pioneering study of the policy preferences of the very wealthy found many contrasts with the views of the general public; as you might expect, the rich are politically different from you and me. But nowhere are they as different as they are on the matter of Social Security. By a very wide margin, ordinary Americans want to see Social Security expanded. But by an even wider margin, Americans in the top 1 percent want to see it cut. And guess whose preferences are prevailing among Republican candidates.

You often see political analyses pointing out, rightly, that voting in actual primaries is preceded by an "invisible primary" in which candidates compete for the support of crucial elites. But who are these elites? In the past, it might have been members of the political establishment and other opinion leaders. But what the new attack on Social Security tells us is that the rules have changed. Nowadays, at least on the Republican side, the invisible primary has been reduced to a stark competition for the affections and, of course, the money of a few dozen plutocrats.

What this means, in turn, is that the eventual Republican nominee — assuming that it's not Trump — will be committed not just to a renewed attack on Social Security but to a broader plutocratic agenda. Whatever the rhetoric, the GOP is on track to nominate someone who has won over the big money by promising government by the 1 percent, for the 1 percent.

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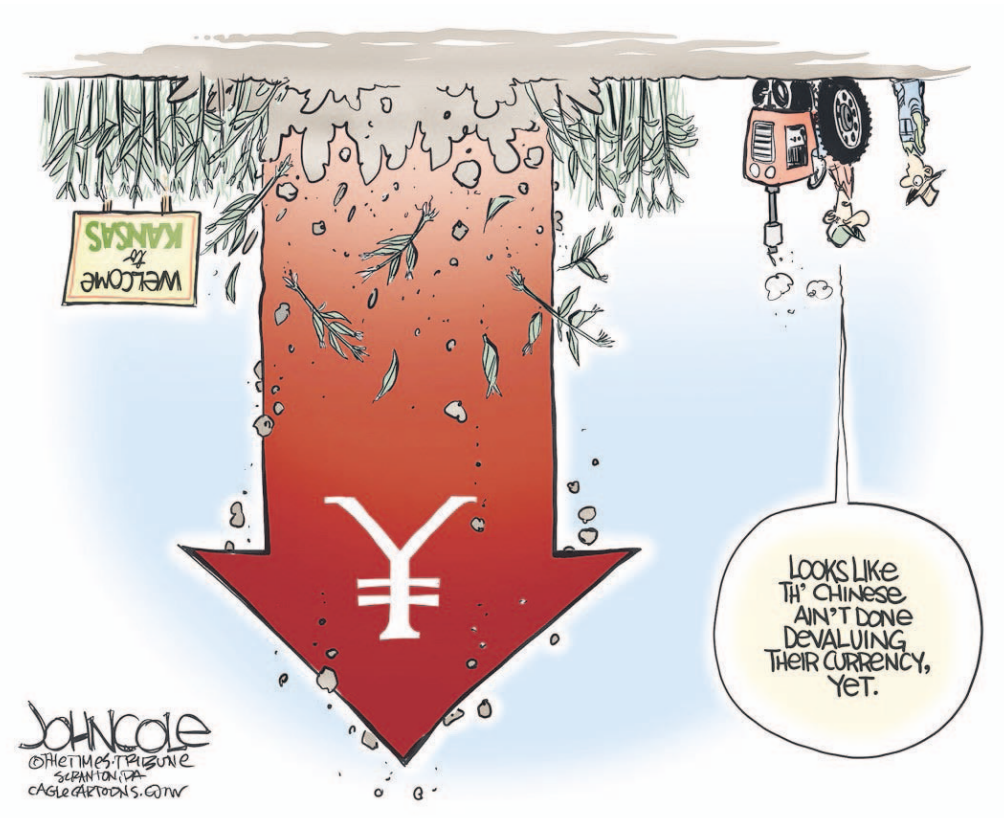
Paul Krugman joined The New York Times in 1999 as a columnist on the Op-Ed Page and continues as professor of Economics and International Affairs at Princeton University.



LETTERS POLICY

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