

Quick takes

Letter from jail

Bummer...being in jail is to punish you of your crimes not meant to be like "life on the outside" maybe since you hate it so very much you won't come back.

Shasta Baney

Maybe I have too much humanity, yes they are in jail. But should not be on concrete floors, or without medical. Don't think they need any luxury but basic humane treatment is a must.

Glenda Jones

If we can send young men to war, we should take care of old men when they come back damaged to hell. Not throw them behind bars and deny them basic needs.

Jairod Collins

Suffer in silence. You broke the law, you pay the price. Believe me those conditions listed are WAY better than my current environment.

Matt Hodge

Targeting young tourists

I could be wrong but I wasn't aware that hipsters had an interest in equine activities or delighted in watching wheat grow on a ranch outside of town.

Jerry Cronin

If you really want young people from Seattle to come and visit Pendleton stop calling them hipsters.

Dave Arkless

One of the great lessons of the Twitter age is that much can be summed up in just a few words. Here are some of this week's takes. Tweet yours @Tim_Trainor or email editor@eastoregonian.com, and keep them to 140 characters.

Fire's nature has dramatically changed

By MIKE BENEFIELD
Writers on the Range

It's time to move irrigation pipe. It's one of those things you have to do when you have a certain amount of land and enough water to irrigate it. My knees hurt as I walk each piece of pipe over to the next dry spot. Here in central Oregon, it's always a race with evaporation. The sun beats down hot as I hear that familiar sound overhead; it's a DC-7 air tanker flying to another wildfire.

I didn't always spend my summers moving irrigation pipe. I was a city kid growing up on the beaches of Southern California until I turned 18 and started fighting wildfires. At 19, my wife and I loaded up all our possessions in a Volkswagen bus and moved to north-central Washington.

It was 1978, and a new world lay before us. We had both ended up working for the Forest Service. We rented an old, five-bedroom farmhouse on the banks of the Entiat River for \$185 a month. It was surrounded by massive black walnut trees and heated by a woodstove. I was fighting fire in the summer and doing whatever I could do in the winter to survive until the next summer. Some winters, I'd work at the local salmon hatchery. As the years passed, I worked as a fire lookout and served as a fire-prevention technician, while gaining more fire experience on hotshot, helitack, engine and fuels crews.

As the fire seasons grew longer, I began

to work in strange places like Alaska, Kentucky and Georgia, and at increasingly high elevations in the Rocky Mountains. Then, my own Entiat Ranger District on the Wenatchee National Forest began to burn — as if it were one large wildfire jigsaw puzzle into which Mother Nature interlocked one blazing mosaic into another, year after year. I fought epic wildfires in Yellowstone, the Central Rockies of Colorado, the chaparral of Southern California, the deserts of the Great Basin and the Southwest. I was even sent to the eucalyptus forests of Australia to fight wildfire.

Over a 30-year firefighting career, I had a front-row seat from which to watch the changing climate, the encroachment

of invasive species and the movement of people out into the urban interface. Those hard years included the terrible loss of fellow firefighters who ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I can remember the times when I found myself in those wrong places. Like California's Ponderosa Fire in 1977, when my engine company was nearly overrun by flame fronts coming at us from different directions. The loads of retardants dropped directly on us saved us that time, but not before we had seared the paint off the doors of our engine and received first-degree burns to our faces and arms. Then there was the Tye Fire on the Wenatchee, where I found myself stuck on a bad road in thick smoke at mid-slope, with fire moving up from below. Unable to back down, I crept

forward until I found clear air. I took a long, smoky, tortuous route out of there, moving through through a blackened forest of falling rocks and smoking snags that fell constantly without warning.

Like most career-wildland firefighters, I relocated often. The small towns that were once quaint (and affordable) logging towns when I arrived became trendy tourist meccas with sky-high rents.

I lived in many places throughout the West. From Entiat to Roseburg to Prineville to Burns — all in Oregon — until I landed in Moab, Utah, where I served in the Bureau of Land Management as the district fire management officer. Moving and firefighting can be hard on families. It was on mine. But overall, it was an amazing ride, in which I saw the best and the worst of people and situations. Always, the work was challenging. The landscape in which I served was as inspirational as it was beautiful. I have lived the dream and then some.

The noisy old air tanker rumbles off into the Western sky, just to the right of Black Butte.

I watch it as it disappears behind Mount Washington. My mind wanders back to a fire line in my past, when I watched an air tanker drop its load right on the mark. Soon it will be replaced by jet-powered aircraft. I lock the last piece of pipe into the hand line and crack open the valve. The water begins to flow and my battle with evaporation continues. Like fighting wildfires in the West, it's a job that requires determination — and good knees.

Mike Benefield is a contributor to Writers on the Range, an op-ed service of High Country News. He lives in Terrebonne, Oregon.

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Planning ahead saves a city heartache down the line

In my last article, I agreed with Larry O'Rourke that the problem cities have is systemic. The solution I proffered was running the city like a Homeowners Association. I have had many questions about this.

It was the accounting portion of the HOA I was alluding to. This accounting method helps to assess the costs and is the basis for what is needed to quantify income to the HOA. However, an HOA goes beyond that. It actually has individual accounts for assets.

For example, let's say the arts center has a roof with a 20-year life. The roof is five years old. The cost of the roof new was \$100,000. If the HOA is set up to fund 100 percent yearly, then \$5,000 plus cost of living is set aside annually. Twenty-five thousand dollars plus cost of living is in a fund for the replacement of the Art Center's roof. This is important because this money can be used for preventative maintenance or emergency repairs on the roof, which may extend the life of the roof by five years or so. When the roof needs to be replaced, the money is already available. Even more important is that the money cannot be used for anything else. It is not arbitrary.

HOAs usually have three areas of accounting. For the city, it would be, for example, common areas maintenance that would include streets, sidewalks and parks, secondly services such as police, fire, ambulance, court facilities, permits, water services and cemeteries, and third amenities such as the Vert Auditorium, library, art center, aquatic park, skateboard park and ice skating rink. Each one of these items mentioned has a cost attributed to it.

Once you can ascertain what the true cost of each of the items is, you can make informed decisions on whether or not you want to keep it. You will also know how much revenue has to be collected to support them, individually and as a consolidated group. This is the most important piece of information we need to know and the one our city cannot tell you at this time.

The next logical step is to determine how to maintain these assets going forward. Our current revenue stream is not adequate to maintain or replace these items. We are at a crossroads. If we continue on the same course we have been on for decades, we can expect further decline in the condition of our city required to make it financially healthy as well as attractive both to tourists and visitors looking at the city as their potential new home, and to those of us who proudly call Pendleton home today.

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AL PLUTE
Comment

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Changing climate a major cause of wildfires

By DAVID C. POWELL

It now seems as if the entire Northwest is on fire, with homes being destroyed and air quality at unhealthy levels. Although there are many reasons for fires, warm weather and drought are certainly important ones. And recent trends showing reduced rainfall and declining mountain snowpack will be repeated if Eastern Oregon's drought continues into the future.

In February and March of this year, the Eastern Oregon Forum presented a series of talks about how the climate of northeastern Oregon is changing, including possible impacts of climate change on agriculture, fisheries, forestry, human health, water resources and wildlife. This op-ed describes options for responding to climate change effects on forests.

Obviously, we can't control the weather. But we can take actions to better prepare our forests for increasing levels of wildfire, insects, and diseases, all of which are related to changing climate conditions. It is important to take these actions soon. Fires are predicted to burn up to six times more acreage, each year, in the Blue Mountains by the middle of this century than was burned annually between 1950 and 2003.

Much of the Blue Mountains are meant to burn, and most of our native plants are adapted to fire as part of their life cycle. Prior to settlement by European emigrants, dry forests at low elevations burned every 5 to 20 years. These fires moved swiftly across the forest floor, killing few large trees but consuming needles, twigs, downed logs, and small seedlings.

After settlement, humans began putting fires out. This worked for a time. But after years of overprotection from fire, forests are now choked with debris and a flammable understory of small trees. When these forests burn, as they inevitably will, they burn hotter, faster, and more completely than ever before.

What can be done to prepare our forests for more wildfire in the future?

Perhaps our best hope lies with thinning. It can be used to mimic presettlement fire by removing the small trees that fire would have killed. This avoids severe fires by eliminating "ladder fuel" — small understory trees that act like a ladder by carrying fire from the ground to the tree tops, where it then races from one tree to another.

After thinning an area, it could then be treated with prescribed fire. It is important to apply prescribed fire in a safe and controlled manner, because it recycles nutrients and removes the small fuels that contribute to severe wildfires. Many of our forests now contain so much fuel that a late-summer wildfire is not a safe experience, either for the forest or the firefighters tasked with suppressing it.

What can be done to help forests, and firefighters, deal with a climate-changed future where wildfire may burn up to six times more area than it does now? Although many different approaches could be used, here are six strategies I recommend:

Resistance. Let's help our existing forests resist the effects of future fires and insect outbreaks. A fuel-choked forest thick with small trees has little resistance to fire. Let's thin these forests because widely spaced trees can, and will, survive a late-summer wildfire. And after we thin, let's apply prescribed fire, when it is safe to do so, because it removes fine fuels and reduces fire risk for 10 years or more.

Resilience. Thinning helps our existing forests resist wildfire in the short term. But how should we create resilient forests for the long term? After thinning to increase the distance between trees, let's plant species that are better adapted to future conditions, especially trees with better drought and fire tolerance than current species that invaded after we began suppressing fires a century ago. Let's plant more Ponderosa pine and remove invasive grand fir.

Restoration. Forests have changed a lot over the last century, largely in response to human uses and demands. If we can restore their species composition (the mix of species in a forest), their

structure (the mix of different tree sizes in a forest), and their density (the amount of space between trees in a forest), then we will have also restored much of their capacity to adapt to future climate change.

Redundancy. Let's resist the temptation to put all our eggs in one basket. We think we know how the climate will change in the future, but I'm betting that a climate-changed future holds many surprises for us and our wildland ecosystems. If we provide a diversity of tree species, forest structures, and stand densities, then future forests will have the tools to better deal with a wide array of possible climate outcomes.

Resources. Fires this summer have clearly shown that we do not have enough resources to aggressively fight every fire. We need to learn how to prioritize our firefighting resources, especially in preparation for a future with more fire than now. The highest priority will always be areas where fire has great potential to harm people and their infrastructure, with lower priority being areas distant enough from communities to allow fire to play its natural role. We also need to allocate more of our financial resources for thinning. On a per-acre basis, it costs much less to thin than it does to suppress a large wildfire.

Relationships. Restoring forest resistance and resilience requires active management treatments such as thinning and prescribed fire. Without active involvement by collaborative groups in the Blue Mountains, consensus to move forward with these treatments will not be reached. For public lands, collaboration needs to lead to trust, or else active management projects will continue to be challenged and litigated. Building relationships between diverse stakeholders is the best way to restore trust in public-land management.

David C. Powell is a member of the Umatilla County climate change focus group. He presented a discussion about climate change and forestry at an EO Forum on in February, which was held at Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton.

