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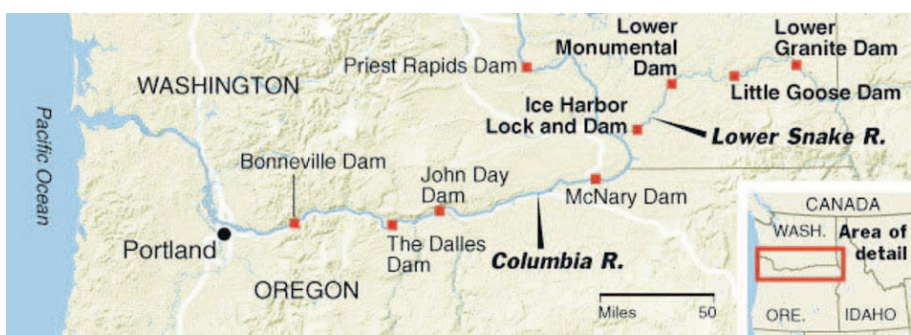
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OUR VIEW



Dams on the Snake and Columbia rivers.

Feds running out of half measures

During the decade that U.S. District Court Judge James Redden rejected Pacific Northwest salmon-restoration plans, detractors quietly pushed the view that he had become an “activist” judge, blinded by personal opinions.

Last week, a judge new to the case — Michael H. Simon

of Portland — ruled on the U.S. government’s latest Northwest salmon plan. If anything, Simon was even less impressed with arguments by NOAA Fisheries, the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation, which claim they are doing enough to stave off extinction for 13 iconic endangered and threatened salmon and steelhead runs.

Fishing groups and conservation organizations say the government is contorting the plain meaning of the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, doing all they can to avoid confronting the “original sin” of erecting four major dams across the Snake River, the major tributary of the Columbia.

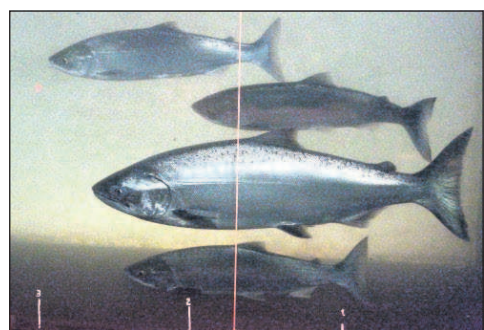
The agencies have undertaken valuable habitat-restoration projects here in the Columbia Basin and downriver — basically trying to do all they can for salmon, short of major modifications to the hydro system. The Columbia is healthier thanks to the agencies, taxpayers and electric ratepayers. Restoring and protecting tidal wetlands, controlling pollution, dramatically increasing research and the level of monitoring of river conditions, controlling predation and other

steps are all worthwhile. These efforts, sometimes coupled with favorable ocean conditions, have produced some decent salmon runs in recent years. But a run considered excellent in these times would have been viewed as disastrous in the pre-dam era. This year’s predicted dismal coho returns demonstrate the fragility of any recovery in current salmon populations.

Taking out the Snake River dams — or lesser actions like bypassing one or more, or drastically increasing the quantity of water spilled from them to mimic natural-flow conditions — is politically difficult. Even environmentally minded Democratic politicians are loath to offend powerful economic interests lined up to defend dams. But the judge is right to suggest dam breaching as perhaps the only way to actually obey the clear mandates of the Endangered Species Act.

Salmon face mounting existential challenges. The judge ruled the agencies’ plan fails to acknowledge catastrophic impacts they may face from climate change. Officials are on thin ice legally when they assert salmon are “trending toward recovery” when actual salmon returns fail to show a sustainable recovery, the judge said.

Simon’s ruling — though stopping short of imposing an action plan — is one more in a long series of repudiations of half-measures. Federal agencies and Congress are fast-approaching a time of reckoning when it comes to ensuring salmon survival.



Two sockeye salmon swim in the Columbia River with a Chinook salmon, middle, at the Bonneville Dam fish-counting window near North Bonneville.

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.

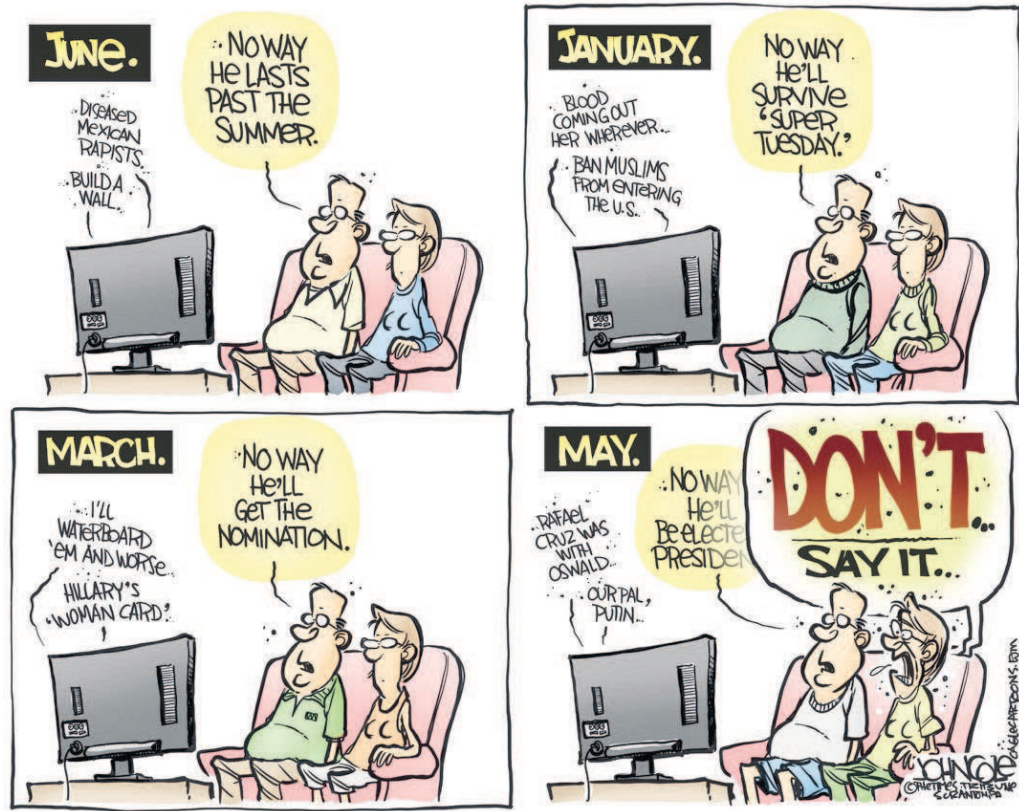
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LETTERS POLICY

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OTHER VIEWS

Does Oregon really value affordability?

The Oregonian, May 7

A collection of legislative, business and environmental leaders met for the first time on Wednesday to discuss transportation, *The (Bend) Bulletin* reported. The goal of the group, assembled by Gov. Kate Brown, is to generate support for a funding package to be considered during the 2017 legislative session. Looming in the background, meanwhile, are the Legislature’s failure to pass a funding package in 2015 and the reason for that failure: the extension of an expensive low-carbon fuel standard, which Republicans refused to follow up with a hike in the gas tax. Their constituents, they reasoned, could take only so much.

The governor’s timing couldn’t be better. Brainstorming on something as significant as road funding can’t start early enough. Let’s hope, too, that the discussions will encourage public debate on two fronts. The first involves transportation funding and the trade-offs lawmakers will have to consider to that end. The second, long overdue, involves Oregon’s values.

Specifically, is affordability a core Oregon value? Do Oregon’s elected leaders — and Oregonians themselves — believe it’s important to consider the cumulative costs of state and local mandates, fees and so forth on lower- and middle-income people?

The question is worth asking at a time when many Oregonians struggle to make ends meet, whether because the cost of housing has soared, as it has in and around Portland, Bend and a few other places, or because lucrative employment is scarce, as is the case in many rural areas. Affordability is something everyone seems to be talking about these days, but there’s little evidence it matters to policymakers and interest groups nearly as much as, say, environmental protection or the preservation of farmland and forestland.

Start with the transportation-funding debate. Lawmakers supported a fuel mandate with a minuscule environmental benefit that is expected to raise fuel costs by up to 19 cents per gallon. They did this knowing that the mandate’s passage would erode legislative support for a gas tax increase, which would have been at the heart of a transportation package. The episode was, and remains, an instructive display of relative values: Environmental protection (largely symbolic here) mattered more than the maintenance of core infrastructure and the price of fuel, which is not a trivial matter to many.

Particularly telling is the stock response of the fuel standard’s supporters to the double-taxation problem (a gas tax on top of the mandate’s cost). The low-carbon fuel standard has nothing to do with road funding, they insist, and should be considered separately. This is a convenient fiction, as anyone filling his or her tank 10 years from now will attest. Unfortunately, the reluctance of lawmakers and interest groups to consider the costs of well-intended policies is all too common, and those who are affected most

are those who have the least. The phenomenon repeated itself during the 2016 legislative session with the passage of the so-called “coal to clean” bill, which will raise rates for Oregonians without doing much for the environment. When state utility commissioners tried to point this out, the governor muzzled them. Clearly, preserving affordability for lower- and middle-income Oregonians mattered less than securing a win for utilities and environmental groups.

Even this year’s minimum-wage hike raises worrisome questions about affordability, which, naturally, went virtually unexamined during the Legislature’s rush to passage. The hike will help some lower-income Oregonians, to be sure. But it will hurt others as employers shed jobs. Rising labor costs will have other effects as well, among them higher expenses for public universities, which are likely to respond by either raising tuition or cutting the hours of working students. So badly did lawmakers not want to hear about such costs that the minimum-wage legislation bypassed the Ways and Means Committee, where fiscal impacts are considered.

Bad intentions are not the problem, and policymakers do respond spasmodically to cost crises involving the most vulnerable. Legislation protecting renters received plenty of attention during this year’s session, for instance. It’s about time, however, that policymakers seek to prevent costs from rising with as much determination as they pursue measures designed to mitigate costs that have swelled, in part, as a result of past policy choices.

You’ll know affordability has become a core Oregon value when this begins to happen regularly.

You’ll also know it when lawmakers exhibit the courage to aggressively update institutions such as the state’s restrictive land-use system, which pushes housing prices upward by restricting land supply.

You’ll know it, too, when they’re willing to reconsider outdated institutions such as Oregon’s bottle bill, for which per-container deposits are likely to double, to a dime, in 2017. If the bottle bill didn’t exist today, when curbside recycling is nearly ubiquitous, the state surely wouldn’t adopt it. Why, then, do we cling to it despite the disproportionate burden it places on those with modest incomes?

Oregon isn’t there yet. Affordability is not a core value no matter how frequently elected officials may emote about the struggles of people with moderate incomes. Inevitably, it seems, something else just matters more.

If Oregonians want this to change, they need to start demanding that their representatives acknowledge the costs of proposed policies and weigh them honestly against their likely benefits. They also need to push their representatives to look honestly at the costs and benefits of existing policies — and, when the former outweigh the latter, do something about it.

The coming transportation-funding debate is as good a place as any to start.

YOUR VIEWS

Pendleton citizens must do their part

During the public comment section of the discussion about Resolution 2637 (the firehouse bond) on May 3, one comment stuck with me. A gentleman spoke in opposition to Resolution 2637, and he referred to the “MacKenzie Report” as some sort of “secret” document. Also, the time frame he used for the amount of time it was public was a week.

He went on to be unreasonable and completely illogical, and I do not feel that he contributed one iota to the productivity of the discussion. However, he illustrates a point that I now wish to make (and I thank the *East Oregonian* for providing the platform to do so): I had the MacKenzie Report a month ago. How did I get it? Simple: First, I read a newspaper article that caught my interest,

then I went to Fire Station #1 unannounced and asked the secretary if there was anyone available who could give me more information. Within 10 minutes I was on a tour of the station and having the MacKenzie Report explained to me in minute detail. I asked for a copy of the report and was given a link from the city website. This was one month ago.

Pendleton citizens are lazy. They can’t be bothered to ask questions about, or contribute to, the well-being of their town. The best mayor, city council, and city manager won’t be able to save the town if the townspeople don’t also do their part. The current regime may need some changing around, but if it’s not the citizens who bring said change, then it will last about as long as reverse parking on Court Street.

James Tibbets
Pendleton