

EAST OREGONIAN

Founded October 16, 1875

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OUR VIEW

Manage forests,
or watch them burn

For those who have not witnessed the blast-furnace heat and the eye-stinging smoke of a wildfire along with the mass destruction of timber, homes, businesses and wildlife, last week was a learning experience.

Nearly every corner of the West was on fire. From Arizona to Washington state and from California to Montana, 65 active fires were burning 2.83 million acres as of late last week. Those numbers include only the fires that were 10,000 acres or larger. The average size of those fires was 43,556 acres.

In some areas, including Portland and Los Angeles, the fires got too close for comfort. Drivers on Los Angeles expressways could see flames racing up the hillsides, and Interstate 84 east of Portland was closed as firefighters valiantly worked to keep the wind-driven flames at bay.

For many Western city dwellers, wildfires just got personal. They were no longer something they watched from afar, watching video snippets from the safety of their homes and apartments. The stench of smoke could be smelled and the raging flames could be seen up close.

Firefighters were forced to prioritize which blazes to fight and which to let go. They hoped to save the lodge at Multnomah Falls in the Columbia Gorge and the lodge at Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park. They battled to keep fires away from Yosemite and Yellowstone national parks.

Among politicians, the chatter was about how to fund firefighters — talk about fiddling while the West burns. They want to make sure the money for firefighters doesn’t come out of the U.S. Forest Service budget but from the money set aside for disasters.

This chatter has been going on for years now, and any effective member of Congress would have gotten it passed and signed by the president. But we haven’t really seen much in the way of effectiveness coming out of

Congress recently, have we? What they need to talk about — and take action on — is the absolutely irresponsible and short-sighted way public lands in the West are managed.

Let’s start with forests, shall we? At some point the Obama administration decided nearly all federal forests were off-limits to logging, the best and only way to manage forests. For decades, foresters have been warning that letting forests go unmanaged will only mean bigger and badder wildfires in the future.

We need federal managers who are allowed to effectively manage publicly owned forests. Instead of taking out roads from national forests, they need to leave them in place. They need to sell timber in strategic ways that will make fighting the next wildfire easier.

In the vast open spaces of the West they need to allow more cattle grazing, which has been shown to be an effective way to keep down cheatgrass and other weeds that burn hot and kill the ecosystem. Juniper trees need to be taken out of all areas, including wilderness, where they are destroying the countryside and hindering the recovery of the greater sage grouse and other important species.

The people who know the West best are those who live there. Federal managers need to listen when people tell them that they are setting up the region for disastrous fires. That has happened time and time again, especially in Oregon and Washington state.

And don’t listen to critics who holler that people just want to clearcut the West. In decades past, federal land was actively managed — logged — and the forests are still a beautiful resource. Those who say they don’t want one tree cut down are simply denying the fact that forests need to be managed, or they will eventually be destroyed by wildfire, bark beetles or disease.

Managing forests and open spaces will not put an end to wildfires, but it will reduce their size and number.

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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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OTHER VIEWS

Complacency could
kill health care

I haven’t yet read Hillary Clinton’s “What Happened,” but it seems pretty clear to me what did, in fact, happen in 2016.

These days, America starts from a baseline of extreme tribalism: 47 or 48 percent of the electorate will vote for any Republican, no matter how terrible, and against any Democrat, no matter how good. This means, in turn, that small things — journalists acting like mean kids in high school, ganging up on candidates they consider uncool, events that suggest fresh scandal even when there’s nothing there — can tip the balance in favor of even the worst candidate imaginable.

And, crucially, last year far too many people were complacent; they assumed that Trump couldn’t possibly become president, so they felt free to engage in trivial pursuits. Then they woke up to find that the inconceivable had happened.

Is something similar about to go down with health care? Republican attempts to destroy Obamacare have repeatedly failed, and for very good reason. Their attacks on the Affordable Care Act were always based on lies, and they have never come up with a decent alternative.

The simple fact is that all the major elements of the ACA — prohibiting discrimination by insurers based on medical history, requiring that people buy insurance even if they’re currently healthy, premium subsidies and Medicaid expansion that make insurance affordable even for those with lower incomes — are there because they’re necessary. Yet every plan Republicans have offered would do away with or undermine those key elements, causing tens of millions of Americans to lose health insurance, with the heaviest burden falling on the most vulnerable.

All this should be clear to everyone by now. So you might be tempted to assume that no plan along these lines can possibly pass, let alone one that, if anything, looks worse than what we’ve seen so far. But it’s precisely because so many people assume that the threat is behind us, and have turned their attention elsewhere, that health care is once again in danger.

The sponsors of the Graham-Cassidy bill now working its way toward a Senate vote claim to be offering a moderate approach that preserves the good things about Obamacare. In other words, they are maintaining the GOP norm of lying both about the content of Obamacare and about what would replace it.

In reality, Graham-Cassidy is the opposite of moderate. It contains, in exaggerated and almost caricature form, all the elements that made previous Republican proposals so cruel and destructive. It would eliminate the individual mandate, undermine if not

effectively eliminate protection for people with pre-existing conditions, and slash funding for subsidies and Medicaid. There are a few additional twists, but they’re all bad — notably, a funding formula that would penalize states that are actually successful in reducing the number of uninsured.

Did this bill’s sponsors — Lindsey Graham, Bill Cassidy, Ron Johnson and Dean Heller — manage to get through months of health care debate without learning anything about the issue? Maybe. But surely the rest of the Senate, not to mention much of the public, has wised up about false Republican promises. A huge majority of voters, almost 2-1, consider it a good thing that previous attempts at repealing and replacing Obamacare failed.

Yet there is a real chance that Graham-Cassidy, which is similar to but even worse than previous Republican proposals, will nonetheless become law, because not enough people are taking it seriously.

As in the presidential election, we start from a baseline of extreme tribalism, in which 48 or 49 Republican senators will vote for anything, no matter how awful, that bears their party’s seal of approval. To make a bill the law, its sponsors only need to win one or two more votes.

The main reason Republican leaders couldn’t do that on previous health bills was public outrage and activism. Letters and phone calls, demonstrators and crowds at town halls, made it clear that many Americans were aware of the stakes, and that politicians who voted to take health care away from millions would be held accountable.

Now, however, the news cycle has moved on, taking public attention with it. Many progressives have already begun taking Obamacare’s achievements for granted, and are moving on from protest against right-wing schemes to dreams of single-payer. Unfortunately, that’s exactly the kind of environment in which swing senators, no longer in the spotlight, might be bribed or bullied into voting for a truly terrible bill.

The good news is that for technical reasons of parliamentary procedure, Graham-Cassidy has to pass by the end of this month, or not at all. The bad news is that such passage is a real possibility.

So if you care about preserving the huge gains the ACA has brought, make your voice heard. Otherwise we may wake up to another terrible morning after.

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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.

YOUR VIEWS

Department of Energy hopes to confuse the public

For those of you not following the changes to the amendment rules the Oregon Department of Energy is asking for comment on until Sept. 29, here are a few highlights:

- Area can be added to a site without having to complete an amendment to a site certificate.
- The Department of Energy will be deciding whether to allow a change without an amendment, to process an amendment as expedited, to use a short or a long process.
- Notice and involvement of agencies and special advisory committees will be up to the discretion of the Department of Energy.
- The public will not be allowed to participate until after the Draft Proposed Order is issued.
- In expedited cases, the public, other agencies and special advisory groups will not be allowed to participate in the process until after a temporary site certificate allowing the developer to proceed with the action has already been approved.
- A contested case opportunity will only occur in one amendment process.
- In one process with no contested case opportunity, the public will not be able to appeal decisions to the Oregon Supreme Court unless they comment about the specific issue they plan to appeal during the ODOE process.
- The public will only be allowed to appeal decisions based upon Divisions 22, 23 and 24, which doesn’t include things like what process amendments are funneled into or whether or not an application is complete, or whether or not the decision to not allow a contested case was made correctly, or any of the rules changed in this Division.
- The Energy Facility Siting Council decides who gets to have a contested case and they issue the final contested case order when the public is challenging the decisions they have made.

Every effort has been made to confuse the public, exclude them from virtually all decisions, remove opportunities to access a contested case process and move all control over decisions into the hands of the Department of Energy and the Energy Facility Siting Council.

Irene Gilbert, co-chair STOP B2H Coalition and legal research analyst Friends of the Grande Ronde Valley La Grande