

O EAST OREGONIAN

OPINION

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OUR VIEW

The mission goes on



DANIEL WATTENBURGER
COMMENT

Among the first conversations I had with Chris Rush after he became publisher of the East Oregonian in May 2018 was about the nature of self-obsessed journalists.

I’ll leave out the names (you know them; they’re not from around here), but he

and I share the opinion that navel-gazing and mugging for the camera don’t benefit the profession or its mission. People pay us to report the news, to suss out facts from a world of falsehoods, to provide context they haven’t considered and answer questions they haven’t thought to ask. They aren’t interested in seeing us pat ourselves on the back for doing our jobs.

But I’ve also come to realize that the tendency of many hard-working journalists to keep their heads down and do their jobs, without taking a moment to explain its importance, is detrimental.

So with my last column as the managing editor of the *East Oregonian*, I’d like to tell you why your local newspaper has been and will continue to be a vital part of your community.

When speaking in public about the *EO*, I often begin by pointing out its 1875 founding. Nearly everything has changed in that time. Businesses and organizations and officials have come and gone, but the newspaper has endured.

Those editions, written and compiled by first-draft historians on a deadline, tell in intricate detail the story of Eastern Oregon. Writers and professors often ask for access to our bound volumes to research the threads of history uncovered and held together in that reporting. It’s humbling to have been part of that tradition, making decisions every day about what should go in the record and seeking out what



EO file photo

Newspapers come off the East Oregonian press.

we’re missing.

But what the newspaper was doing at the turn of the 20th century, and even the 21st, is only a small part of its value. The subscribers and advertisers of those days paid for those editions to be created and distributed.

Readers and advertisers still fund our work, but they have different demands — especially readers. The newspaper was once an understood staple of daily life, a product delivered, considered and recycled. It covered a breadth of topics, bringing news, opinion, humor, gossip and public notices into one place.

Now consumers can find many of these things readily on the internet. Garfield is no match for a YouTube rabbit hole. Our single page of opinion can’t begin to satisfy the modern hunger for hot takes, long reads and political memes. And gossip — the days of the newspaper’s Society page is long gone, replaced by the boundless depths of social media.

So rather than creating a product that attempts to replicate the newspapers of days gone by, we’re working to be a service that excels at the core function of offering irreplaceable local news.

A few examples from the past year: Umatilla County is home to two of the state’s prisons with the capacity to house 3,500 inmates — about five percent of the county’s population. Kathy Aney and E.J. Harris spent time last summer shadowing inmates and corrections officers to show what daily life is like for both.

A conflict between an elderly Stanfield widower and his housekeeper spilled from the court system to social media, with each accusing the other of criminal mistreatment. A lengthy reporting process, including multiple interviews by Phil Wright with both parties, law enforcement and the district attorney, showed the story wasn’t as cut and dried as the debate on Facebook would lead to believe. The abrupt resignation of Pendleton’s

fire chief, beloved by many in the community, was yet another in a series of short tenures in the city department. While few officials spoke on the record, Antonio Sierra reported on public records that showed a clash between the fire chief and police chief, who has administrative oversight of his department.

We’ve done in-depth reporting on the influx of Amazon data centers near Hermiston and drone testing in Pendleton, the impact of homelessness on children and adults, and the influx of non-English speakers into the classroom and courtroom.

In all our reporting, we’re trying to simultaneously pique and satisfy our readers’ curiosity. We’re trying to provide context to the stories you already know a little bit about, and break ground on topics you haven’t begun to consider.

This newsroom will have a new editor in the coming months, but the mission won’t change. And I’d whole-heartedly suggest as a reader, you take advantage of the service we’d like to provide. Ask questions, write letters to the editor, stop by for a chat.

A newspaper can only be as good as its community, and vice versa.

On a personal note, I’d like to thank all the great people I’ve worked with inside and outside the walls of this newspaper office. I’ve had mentors who taught me the trade, but also that after the deadline passes we’re all people who must live with and care for one another. I’ve had the pleasure of leading a team of talented journalists who are passionate about reporting the news in rural Oregon, and hopefully I’ve been able to pass along some of those lessons. And I’ve been welcomed by every community I’ve set foot in, even though my home has always been in Hermiston.

It’s been a special place to work and I’m thankful to the readers who continue to pick us up each day.

OTHER VIEWS

Your public lands are killing you

Out in the way beyond, the open land on the far side of the Mueller report and cable news obsessives, is a vast kingdom now being used to hasten the demise of the planet.

You may know this area, more than 500 million acres of empty vales and thick forests, high plains and diamond-cut peaks, as something you saw on a screen saver, or marked as a distant bucket list destination. It’s your American public land endowment, your birthright at citizenship.

What you may not know is that while you were sleeping through the white noise from the White House, your public servants were put under the control of the oil and gas industry. They have been busy giving away drilling rights on your land for next to nothing. More precisely — per acre, for even less than the cost of a Bacon McDougle, which of course you should eat only in moderation.

And they’re doing this in the face of considerable evidence that the rush into industrial plunder of these lands is a huge source of planet-convulsing carbon emissions.

But behold: A history-making lawsuit on behalf of children who will inherit this mess could put an end to the Trump administration plan to drill till we drop. Although the courts have never recognized a constitutional right to a livable environment, the lawsuit, *Juliana v. United States*, has been given a green light to pursue just that.

“This is no ordinary lawsuit,” wrote federal judge Ann Aiken of Oregon in allowing the case to proceed. “I have no doubt that the right to a climate system capable of sustaining human life is fundamental to a free and ordered society.”

If that judicial statement was a stunner, what happened this month in another case was equally extraordinary. For the first time, a federal judge temporarily halted drilling on federal land because the government did not take into account the climate change impact of that drilling.

Forget about the unworkable Green New Deal, which Republicans are using as a prop to show how silly both parties are. Cow flatulence! No air travel! The end of “ham-borders!” It’s been a gift to right-wing demagogues, looking to further dumb down a Republican base that doesn’t believe anything a wounded earth is trying to tell them.

The real action is unfolding now, on federal land. Prior administrations allowed for considerable oil and gas drilling in swaths of the public domain in the West. But President Donald Trump is holding a fire sale for his fellow fossil fools. The amount of federal land offered for drilling is

three times what it was under President Barack Obama.

It would be one thing if we needed this oil. We don’t. The world is awash in cheap crude. And it would be another if these lands weren’t being used for something that poses an existential threat. They are. Almost 25 percent of American earth-warming emissions originate from industrial action involving public land or offshore leases.

The United States is the biggest carbon polluter in history, and now ranks behind only China in greenhouse gas emissions. As well, we’re now the largest crude oil producer in the world. And we’ve become a leading exporter of that oil, just to show how bad of a global citizen we can be.

If you force the Trump administration to stop bingeing on public land, you can make an immediate impact on the amount of earth-warming carbon the United States spits into the atmosphere.

Such an injunction is what the children represented by a trust in the *Juliana* lawsuit are trying to do. And it was that sort of injunction, acknowledging the role of drilling on public land in harming us all, that temporarily shut down new leasing on 300,000 acres in Wyoming this month.

Another big step is to prevent David Bernhardt, a former oil and gas lobbyist, from becoming interior secretary. A stooge for his former clients, this Trump nominee was the deputy secretary, while the top job was held by a strange man, Ryan Zinke, who paraded around on a horse named Tonto.

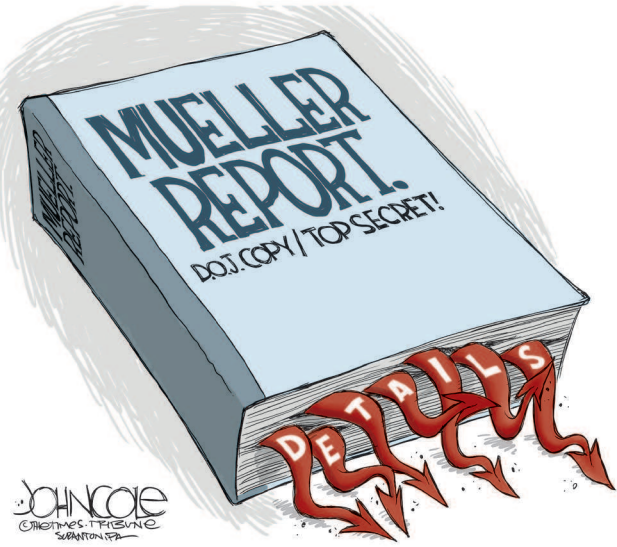
It was Bernhardt who tried to block release of a federal analysis showing that two widely used pesticides were so toxic that they “jeopardize the continued existence” of more than 1,200 species of birds, fish and other life-forms without lobbyists, as my colleague Eric Lipton reported this week.

You can see who Bernhardt is working for: It’s not all the living things under the domain of the emperor of the outdoors. Nor is he looking out for the interests of children, who will have to live with the consequences of action taken by adults in service to carbon pollution.

About those kids: Sen. Mike Lee of Utah recently took to the floor of his chamber to say that the best response to the mounting chaos of epic floods, searing wildfires and other symptoms of a sick earth is to get married and have children.

What he didn’t say was that we hold our public land in trust for the Americans of tomorrow. The least we can do is stop using it to imperil their world.

Timothy Egan is a columnist for the New York Times.



YOUR VIEWS

Too much focus on taxes

I would like to thank the *East Oregonian* for the well-written article on the city of Pendleton’s attempt to tackle the issue of repairing their roads. The article laid out the facts: our road infrastructure is in bad shape and the longer we avoid the problem, the more expensive it becomes. I was pleased to see that the city manager and city council are taking on this difficult issue. No one wants to ask the public for more money, and too often public officials will avoid these hard problems. This is what good leadership looks like.

On the other hand, I am disappointed by the click-bait headline that the *EO* chose to splash over the story. This should not be a story about taxes. It’s about maintaining our city infrastructure. One of the reasons that public officials don’t want to propose fixes to our problems is that there are always costs. If the press screams “Return of the Gas Tax?” over an article like this, it plays into the most divisive aspects of our current political culture.

I have no problem with the *EO* pointing out the fact that the city has, in the past, pushed through a gas tax to fund a project of questionable public benefit (e.g. the road to nowhere). The city needs to regain the public trust after that debacle. However, the *EO* should help the public understand the hard choices we now face, rather than simply playing on old resentments to drum up controversy.

Dan Haug
Pendleton

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