

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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OUR VIEW

Individual responsibility can make a difference

The good news about the recent surge of the COVID-19 virus locally is that cases appear to be declining.

Yet, the information that officials linked nearly 250 COVID-19 cases to the Pendleton Round-Up should give everyone pause and provide food for thought as we all move forward in what is now a new paradigm created by the pandemic.

Area officials and sponsors faced a difficult decision regarding the Round-Up because there was probably no way to completely ensure there would be no COVID-19 cases to emerge from the event.

The delta variant of the virus is everywhere now and especially contiguous. Yet, 250 cases is a big number, bigger than usual and should be a reminder that COVID-19 and its variants are here to stay.

The best course of action to avoid COVID-19 remains to get vaccinated, but that must be always a personal decision between a resident and their health care provider.

The big question going forward is how to minimize the impact of COVID-19 during an event such as the Pendleton Round-Up and whether any system of precautions will be enough. It is fair to say that only so much can be done to eradicate the possibility of catching COVID-19 during a major event.

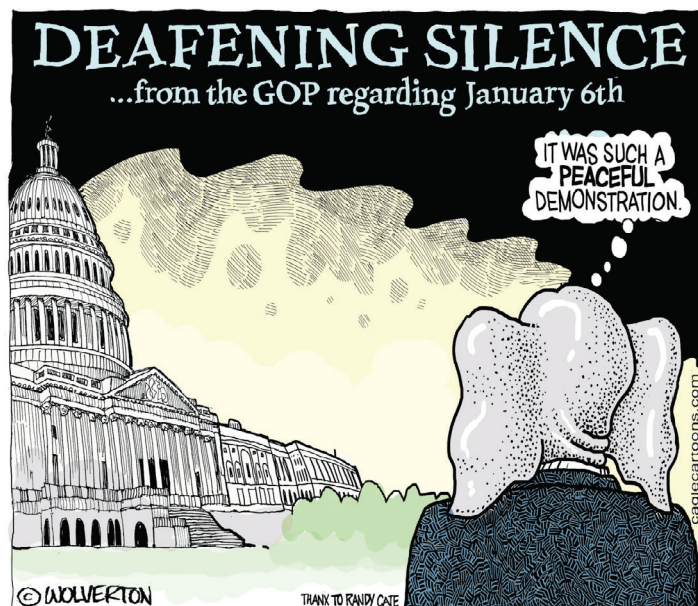
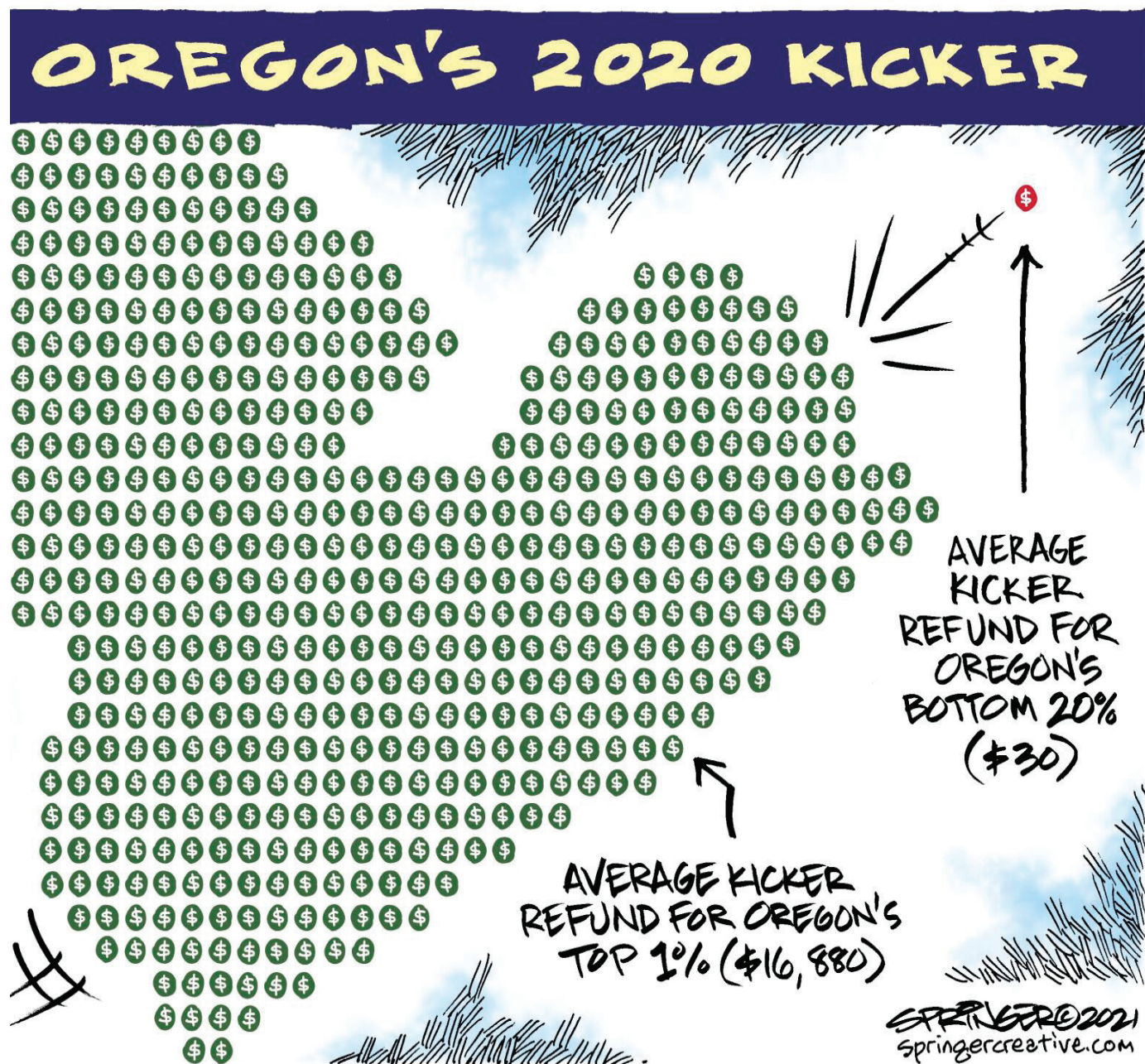
If an individual decides the vaccine isn't their best choice than that is their right.

So, in the end, avoiding the virus inside big venues that attract lots of people becomes a question of personal responsibility. That means each of us must try to adhere to the tried-and-true mechanisms of the past — mask, social distancing — to avoid the virus.

The only other option — and one we don't support — would be to go back to a total shutdown, as the state did in the early days of the pandemic. There is no doubt the shutdowns hampered the spread of the virus. Yet, in that case, the cure — shutting the state down and telling people to stay home — was a far more invasive cure than most of us expected or wanted.

Business, especially small shops in places like Eastern Oregon, suffered especially hard times because of the shutdown. Economically the shutdowns proved to be a disaster.

So, a shutdown of the state isn't in the cards, nor would it be advisable. Which gets us back to personal responsibility. We need to remember that, in the end, it is us individually that can make the biggest difference. Follow the guidelines, wear a mask and practice social distancing.



Oregon shows how workers can be protected



JAMIE PANG

OTHER VIEWS

As a result of climate change, the United States experienced a particularly dangerous and hot summer this year. New record highs were set all over the country and the Pacific Northwest was particularly hard hit.

As of September, according to the National Weather Service, the state of Oregon had a record 88 days over 80 degrees (considered the high heat threshold for our state) and suffered through three triple-digit heat domes.

In June, temperatures reached 124 degrees and more in some areas of the state.

Simultaneously, the state Department of Environmental Quality repeatedly sent out air quality warnings for southern and central Oregon due to wildfire smoke, as we experienced another record wildfire season. By July 2021, KGW reported, more than 1,000 wildfires burned 60 times the amount of acreage burned the same time last year.

Our daily experience in Oregon now confirms what science has been telling us for years. The climate crisis is making heat waves and wildfires more intense and more frequent. The combined crises are endangering everyone, but frontline workers experience higher risks.

During the June heat dome, a migrant farmworker named Sebastian Francisco Perez died alone while laying irrigation pipes. Heat exhaustion also claimed the lives of construction workers, and increased risk and injury for numerous outdoor workers and elderly individuals living alone.

There have been more than 100 deaths in Oregon due to heat illness, thousands of emergency room visits and 254 complaints submitted to Oregon OSHA in the three-day span in June just for excessive heat exposure.

Our new reality is that every summer millions of U.S. workers will be exposed to heat and wildfire smoke in their workplaces. Essential jobs with high exposure levels, such as agricultural labor, bus drivers and warehouse workers, are disproportionately held by Black and Brown workers. These same frontline essential workers get paid less than white-collar workers and have more risk exposure, yet they are expected to work in very hot or smokey environments with no employer provided protective equipment.

The disproportionate harm that excessive heat and smoke have on essential workers is entirely preventable. Spurred by the death of Sebastian Francisco Perez, Oregon Occupational Health and Safety Organization made great strides this summer by enacting three emergency rules to address worker exposure to excessive heat and smoke.

These safeguards are activated once the heat index reaches 80 degrees, and apply to both indoor and outdoor workplaces. They require common sense protections, like providing access to shade and cold drinking water. When temperatures spike above 90 degrees, additional measures kick in, including mandatory paid 10-minute breaks and active monitoring for heat illness.

The rules enacted by Oregon OSHA mean that Oregon has the most protective standards in the nation for excessive heat. And, since the temporary rules were enacted, there were no known deaths in the workplace due to excessive heat or smoke during August's triple digit heat wave.

But these rules are not yet permanent and apply only in Oregon. And it is still

unclear whether 10-minute breaks are significant enough to reduce harm for the most physically demanding jobs.

Oregon's rules have proven successful thus far. They should become the baseline for permanent rules in Oregon, and for the nation. Oregon OSHA is evaluating the efficacy of the emergency rules with plans to announce permanent rules in the coming months.

Nationally, we were excited to see that the Biden Administration launched a coordinated, interagency effort to respond to extreme heat and consider national worker protections from extreme heat and wildfire smoke, citing specifically the climate change and the heat dome recently witnessed in the Pacific Northwest.

While details of the national effort are still forthcoming, the White House's press release noted the protections, like Oregon's, will also cover indoor and outdoor workers, and plans to prioritize heat-related interventions and workplace inspections on days when the heat index exceeds 80 degrees.

Federal rulemaking can take years to complete and lives are on the line. What is adopted here in the West will undoubtedly influence national protections in the years to come.

Sadly, summers are likely to get hotter until we make more progress to reduce climate pollution, so we must act to protect vulnerable workers from the impacts of climate change.

We are proud that Oregon has taken an initial role as a leader on protecting workers from heat and smoke, and Oregon OSHA should set a model for the nation by adopting even stronger protections than what is included in the emergency rules.

Jamie Pang is the environmental health program director at the Oregon Environmental Council.

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