

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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OUR VIEW

Research shows value of forest work

The benefits of thinning crowded forests and igniting prescribed fires to get rid of the combustible debris that's left hardly qualify as newly discovered truths.

But recent research led by scientists from the College of Forestry at Oregon State University, besides adding to the evidence that such work helps protect forests from catastrophic wildfires by reducing the fuel load, also shows that in some cases thinning alone can yield tangible advantages even before the managed flames are kindled.

James Johnston, a research associate at OSU, and his colleagues published their findings in *Forest Ecology and Management*. The study, which looked at years of data from areas in ponderosa pine forests in Northeastern Oregon, "shows that mechanical thinning can moderate fire behavior even in the absence of prescribed fire," Johnston said.

Johnston and the other researchers, including Julia Olszewski, Becky Miller and Micah Schmidt from the College of Forestry, Lisa Ellsworth from OSU's College of Agricultural Sciences, and Michael Vernon of Blue Mountains Forest Partners, used computer modeling to predict how fire would behave in areas that were thinned, as well as forest parcels that weren't.

Their research showed that although fuel on the ground increases for a year or two after thinning, the amount declines thereafter, as does the amount of litter and duff on the forest floor.

The researchers' findings are important not because they diminish the importance of prescribed fire.

Indeed, Johnston notes prescribed burning "is still a key tool for meeting fuel reduction and fire management objectives in the ponderosa pine forests of the southern Blue Mountains and elsewhere."

But Johnston also points out that prescribed burning, for a variety of reasons, can take longer to be approved compared with thinning.

"Less than one-fifth of the area treated with mechanical thinning in the southern Blues has also been treated with prescribed fire," he said. "Prescribed fire has been significantly slowed by budget constraints, local opposition to fire use, and restrictions imposed by COVID-19 response measures."

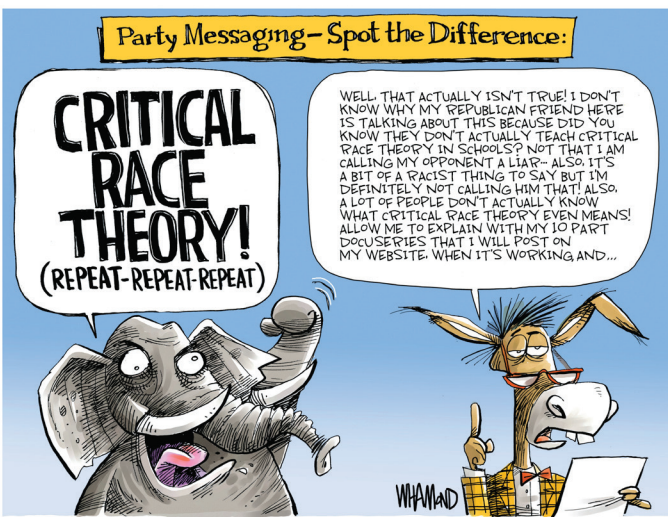
Weather can be an impediment, too. Prescribed burning usually is done during spring and fall, but in some seasons it's either too wet for effective fires, or too dry to light them without the risk of flames getting out of control.

Congress has over the past decade or so allocated more money for projects, including thinning and prescribed burning, in Eastern Oregon and elsewhere. An example is the East Face project, which includes about 48,000 acres of public land from the Anthony Lakes Highway north to the Ladd Canyon area. The East Face project includes thinning — some of which involves trees large enough to be sold to mills — and prescribed burning. Much of the work is along roads and ridge-lines and is designed to create fuelbreaks, places where firefighters would have a better chance of stopping a wildfire. In all, Congress has spent more than \$17 million between 2012 and 2020 to thin about 215,000 acres in the southern Blues.

The research from Johnston and his colleagues shows this public money is being well-spent, and lawmakers should seek to accelerate the effort.

With climate change leading to longer and often more severe fire seasons, thinning and prescribed burning are more vital than ever.

It's gratifying to see scientific proof that thinning by itself helps protect forests.



YOUR VIEWS

Treating each other with respect and understanding

We live together on our beautiful Mother Earth, but we are recklessly destroying both it and our society. Relationships are becoming ever more polarized and chaotic as we adopt partisan sets of opposing facts about reality, increasingly resist coming together to solve our most basic problems, and continue to allow big money to control things.

Today, we face two overarching threats: Widespread poverty and global warming. The fallout from our thoughts and actions — or inaction — is becoming ever more stark and ominous. It's past time for deep and meaningful change, well beyond what's left of the Build Back Better bill.

Poverty is closest to home. Many, if not most, Americans are deeply anxious and depressed about their economic condition, based largely on our 45-year history of lost jobs and stagnant, low wages due to computer automation and off-shoring.

Quiet desperation can provoke blind trust and misplaced loyalty. We may well be headed toward a loss of social norms and toward the acceptance of a right-wing, totalitarian society. The Jan. 6 "Save America" insurrection at the U.S. Capitol offers a preview.

Big and bold innovation and open-minded collaboration are urgently needed. For example, a Universal Basic Income of, say, \$1,000 per citizen per month would benefit everyone, as shown by the numerous UBI pilot projects.

Similarly, a refundable carbon tax

would shift consumer demand away from fossil fuels, while carbon tax monies would be recycled to consumers (say, \$2,000 per family annually) to prevent economic hardship. Top economists support it.

Workable answers lie within reach. Can we develop the community spirit to adopt and implement them?

Do we have the political will to heavily tax the income and wealth handed to the very few who profit from our low, stagnant wages? Can we surmount our knee-jerk aversion to new taxes, even if they are refundable?

Let us avoid disaster on this small, blue planet, and transform ourselves and our society by treating each other with respect and understanding.

Let us firmly reject chaos, sit down together, vigorously engage, and allow our heartfelt, mutual desires and longings to be fully realized.

Marshall McComb
Baker City

Applause for Wyden, River Democracy Act

I am writing to give voice to those who have none — our nonhuman relatives and many other members of our community who support the protections that would be provided by Sen. Ron Wyden's River Democracy Act. As a resident of Halfway — Nimiipuu Lands — I am happy to be joined by many friends, neighbors, and importantly, the Nez Perce and Umatilla tribes.

Clean, cold waters sustain rich aquatic habitats that produce fish and wildlife in diversity and abundance. That so many rural voices have nomi-

nated not just big, iconic rivers, but also smaller tributaries for protection, bespeaks a collective wisdom in seeing our water cycle in a holistic manner.

Opposition to including these is not unlike treating a cardiovascular problem by solely focusing on the arteries — a questionable practice with a likely sorry outcome.

I invite readers to consider a case study I observed in the mid-2000s, working on salmon recovery with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Pendleton.

Studies of the Umatilla River by their natural resources staff demonstrated how railroads and highways blocked the flow of surface and ground water into the main channel. This disconnect prevented the mixing of cooler waters with the warming main stream and degraded the aquatic habitat for cold water fish species.

The tribe's salmon-restoration strategy aimed to reconnect these hyporheic flows by protecting their headwaters and breaching barriers across the flood plain.

Thermal pollution is a leading factor impairing the quality of our surface waters. This is a problem for humans and nonhumans alike. If we genuinely care about protecting the values of our waterways, it would be irresponsible of us to exclude tributaries, intermittent streams and wetlands from the protections of the River Democracy Act.

I applaud Wyden and his river nominations for their vision.

Mike Beaty
Halfway

EDITORIALS

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