PEPPER
TRAIL

OTHER VIEWS

A new predator stalks the West

The grizzly bear. The wolf. The cougar. These magnificent creatures, apex predators, how can we not admire them? People cross the world for the opportunity to see one in the wilds of Yellowstone or Alaska.

There, we view them from a distance, free to indulge our awe in safety. It has been a long time since Americans lived in fear of wild beasts.

But now that fear has returned. Fear felt not just in the woods, but also in cities and towns: Paradise, California; Talent, Oregon; and now in suburban Superior and Louisville in Colorado's Boulder County.

The dangerous predator we're facing these days is wildfire, charging even out of grasslands to destroy our very homes. And no one is safe.

As an ecologist, I know that predators are essential to the health of wildlife communities, keeping prey populations in check. They're also a driving force in evolution, favoring the faster or stronger or smarter animals able to escape their attacks. Of course, civilization long ago freed us from the evolutionary pressure exerted by predators. But that freedom has come at a cost.

When populations and ecosystems grow badly out of balance, there must come a correction. Humans and the environments we have created are not immune to this rule, and we must recognize that we have unleashed the fire-predator through our own choices.

What choices? On the global scale, we have released vast amounts of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. This was done at first in ignorance, but for at least the past 30 years, it truly was a choice made in the face of increasingly desperate warnings.

The resulting greenhouse effect has raised temperatures and decreased rain and snowpack throughout the West, contributing to "fire weather" like the hurricane-force winds that shockingly bore down on the suburbs of Denver in the dead of winter.

We also made land-management choices that strengthened the threat of fire. First, we behaved as if we could banish fire from the landscape, suppressing all wildland fires everywhere, and ending the use of prescribed fire in forests as a management tool. This led to a huge build-up of flammable fuels.

Second, industrial-scale logging eliminated over 90% of fire-resistant old-growth forests and replaced them with highly flammable tree plantations. Finally, we vastly expanded our human footprint, building houses right where the fire-predator likes to roam, at the brink of forests and grasslands.

Reconciling ourselves to the depredations of wildfire requires that we take the long view — the really long view. The fuel-choked forests resulting from our (mis)management need to burn, and they will burn. The best we can do is to preserve the old forests that remain and manage younger forests to increase their resilience to moderate-intensity fire. It could be a century or more before a new forestland equilibrium is reached, one with lower fuel loads, better adapted to the high fire-frequency climate we have created.

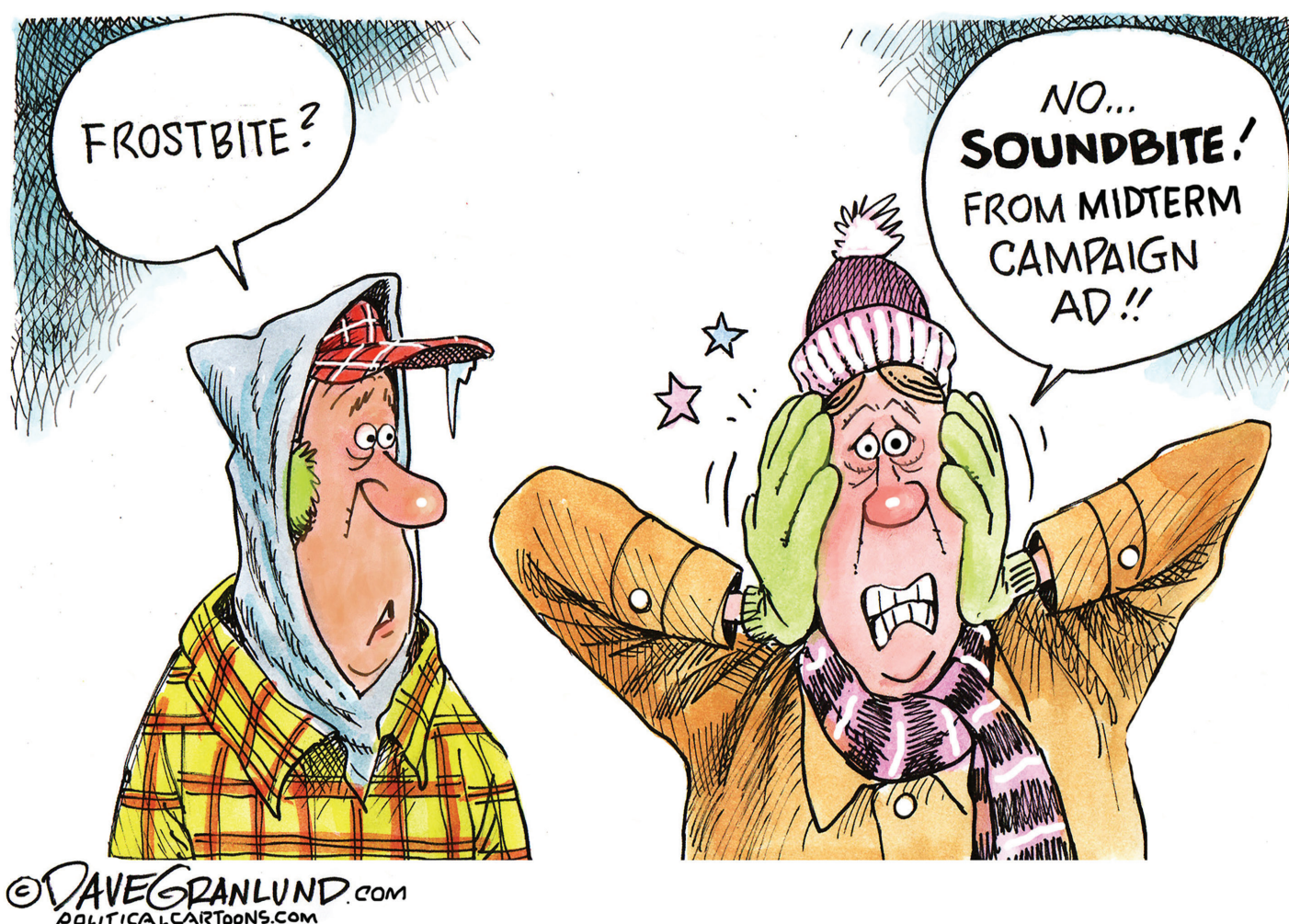
Meanwhile, what about us? Colorado's Marshall Fire proved that wildfire is the one predator we can't eliminate. Far from any forest, this was pushed through tinder-dry grasslands by howling winter winds and burned more than 1,000 suburban homes in a matter of hours. So, like any prey species, we must adapt as best we can. As individuals, we can create defensible space around our homes. We can get skilled at escaping wildfire by having evacuation plans ready.

As a society, we can adopt sensible policies to limit sprawling development in fire-prone areas. Recent events prove that these include not just remote forestlands, but even grasslands near suburbs. Faced with predators, animals try to get into the center of the herd. We need to do the same, avoiding exposure to the fire-predator at the vulnerable edge.

Finally, we can — we must — embark on an urgent global effort to end the burning of fossil fuels within the next few decades. If we do not, the West will face year-round fire weather, and a future at the mercy of fire.

Yet there is reason for hope: the uniquely human capacity for rapid social and cultural evolution. Let's harness that strength, and work toward the day when fire is a predator no more, but our powerful partner in the stewardship of the land.

Pepper Trail is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He is an ecologist in Ashland.

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Statehouse security beefs up

DICK
HUGHES

OTHER VIEWS

When I began covering the Oregon Legislature full time, I could enter the state Capitol anytime I wanted.

As a member of the Capitol press corps, I had a key. For example, that key once allowed me into the basement pressroom on a Saturday morning to catch up on work, accompanied by our son supposedly sleeping in his baby carrier. Oops. It seems our vocal son did not share my parenting vision of quietly bonding while working.

Still that around-the-clock access has been handy. I beat other reporters on stories not because I had more talent or smarts — I don't — but because I outworked them. In the 1980s, I learned to be the last one in the pressroom each day, especially on Friday nights when state regulators tended to drop off press releases announcing the latest closures of insolvent banks. I sometimes came in on weekends to write in quiet or to check the press release dropbox.

Savvy state officials, such as Secretary of State Norma Paulus, periodically strolled through the pressroom to share news tips before heading home. Back then, security was so relaxed that Gov. Vic Atiyeh often ate lunch in the Capitol cafeteria with everyone else. If I wanted different food options, I could walk through the Capitol Mall tunnels to cafeterias in adjacent state buildings.

And because state Senate President John Kitzhaber was not easy to catch, at the end of the day I'd occasionally hang out by his SUV — long before they were called SUVs — in the Capitol's underground parking garage, hoping for a brief interview. Kitzhaber always grinned to see me, and sometimes he'd talk.

I still have a Capitol exterior key, an electronic one, as do hundreds of elected officials, staff members, journalists and others. But I long ago lost entrance to the tunnels and to the Capitol basement garage. I've encountered locked hallway doors into the

legislative office wings. And around-the-clock access into the Capitol may disappear, although that's no longer a journalistic necessity.

Legislative officials this week confirmed what had been reported previously: "Anyone entering the Capitol will be required to pass through a security checkpoint." That entails walking through metal detectors staffed by security guards and having bags checked by hand or sent through an X-ray machine.

It's about time. I'll have to train myself to leave my little Swiss Army pocketknife behind.

The changes take effect Thursday, Jan. 27. Despite the inconvenience, Oregon's Capitol will remain comparatively open. In travels around the U.S., I've wandered freely into some state capitols but found others almost inaccessible. Thirty-three state Capitols already use metal detectors, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The Capitol security changes were expected after the 2021 Legislature banned holders of concealed weapons permits from having their firearms in the Capitol. By the way, I hear legislative management was not keen on some security upgrades suggested by the legislative employees' new union.

As for state government coverage, it too evolves. Fewer reporters work out of the Capitol pressroom, press releases arrive via email and social media, and anyone can watch legislative proceedings online. Though I drive by the Capitol every day or two, I've rarely been inside since the 2020 legislative session and the subsequent pandemic lockdowns.

Meanwhile, the Legislature's presiding officers — House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, who is resigning as of Jan. 21, and Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem — ordered legislative employees to work remotely whenever possible during this week's Legislative Days and the 2022 Legislature, which convenes next month. The reason: COVID-19.

Their memo to legislators and employees said: "The Capitol is diligently working to limit exposure of staff and community and to only designate staff as essential when necessary. This means your manager could

determine that you are essential to be in the Capitol for a particular day or activity and then be returned to nonessential status.

"In order to keep the Capitol community safe, each of us needs to follow the safety and health rules including wearing face coverings at all times and avoiding close contact (closer than 6 feet for 15 minutes or more in a 24-hour period) whenever possible. Many of us are fortunate and able to work remotely and are not exposed, yet we are key to protecting those who must report to the building."

Another positive COVID-19 case in the Capitol was reported last week.

Where does Kristof reside: The Oregon Supreme Court has agreed to take up the case of whether would-be Democratic gubernatorial candidate Nicholas Kristof qualifies as an Oregon resident. Secretary of State Shemia Fagan and the state Elections Division declared him ineligible to run.

Molly Woon, a spokesperson for Fagan, disputed the notion in last week's column that there was a political push to declare Kristof ineligible. "She received no pressure whatsoever, except from the public relations campaign his campaign ran," Woon said of Fagan.

In contrast, a reader in central Oregon felt the description was accurate, writing: "In our view (over here!), he is a legitimate candidate, and represents new hope for Oregon — certainly in terms of dismantling what has become a 30-year Democratic bureaucratic monster."

Another reader, a tax accountant, wrote: "When I think of the definition of a resident, I center in on residency as defined for income tax purposes. ... In none of the media stories I've read or heard do any of Mr. Kristof's stated attributes of Oregon residency add up to him being a qualified Oregon resident for income tax filing purposes."

Kristof said the residency issue comes up "surprisingly rarely" in his discussions with voters. "People want to talk about affordable housing. They want to talk about homelessness. They want to talk about wages," he told me.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.

Logging and carbon

GEORGE
WUERTHNER

OTHER VIEWS

One of the arguments alleged by proponents of thinning or logging forests is that it would preclude wildfires and reduce carbon emissions from wildfire. Proponents argue that more trees survive a fire if there has been "active forest management."

The problem with such ebullient pronouncements is that they fail to provide a full accounting of the carbon losses and emissions.

A number of studies that reviewed carbon emissions conclude that logging and wood processing emits far more carbon than a fire.

For instance, one study estimates that logging in the United States releases five times the carbon as wildfire, bark beetles, wind thrown, land use conversions, and drought combined.

Another Oregon study calculates that 35% of the carbon emissions in the state results from the wood products sector, while wildfires average approximately 4%.

Making matters worse is that logging advocates fail to consider that in thinning the forest, you are killing trees. The problem is that where and when a fire will occur is unpredictable. The majority of all thinned acres never encounter a fire. Some estimates suggest less than 1-2% of all thinned acres experience a fire when they might potentially influence fire behavior and tree mortality.

As one group of researchers concluded: "Thinning forests to reduce potential carbon losses due to wildfire is in direct conflict with carbon sequestration goals." They go on to conclude "the amount of carbon removed to change fire behavior is often far larger than that saved by changing fire behavior, and more area has to be harvested than will ultimately burn over the period of effectiveness of the thinning treatment."

In fact, one estimate suggests it may take 100 years to replace the carbon loss resulting from forest management.

Thinning larger areas to decrease the probability of high-severity fire ensures decreased carbon stock and net carbon balance over the treated area.

Let us say 50% of the trees are removed in a thinning project, that is 50% of the stored carbon. So even if a thinned stand burns

at lower severity and most trees survive a fire, the net result is still a significant loss of carbon due to tree removal because of the logging.

Plus, in logging the trees (killing them), you reduce the future carbon storage that would have otherwise occurred had the trees remained in the forest.

So, we get a guaranteed removal of carbon and carbon emissions with logging/thinning that contributes to climate warming, which is, in turn, contributing to more fires.

Even if a forest stand burns in a high severity fire where the majority of trees are killed, most of the carbon remains on the site as snags, branches, charcoal, and roots in the soil.

A further problem is an assumption that logging the forest will preclude large high severity blazes (where most trees are killed). However, there is abundant scientific and anecdotal evidence that logging does little to prevent large wildfires.

The best management for our forests and climate is to stop logging our public forests.

George Wuerthner is an ecologist who specializes in fire ecology and livestock issues.