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OPINION

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OUR VIEW

Fuel tax ‘vacation’ no panacea, but worth a look

When you’re watching the dollar figure on the gas pump display rise with dizzying speed, as it does these days, the prospect of slowing that mounting tab has a certain attraction.

This is the idea behind President Joe Biden’s proposal that Congress suspend federal gasoline and diesel tax — 18 cents per gallon — for three months. The president also is urging states to enact a similar “vacation” from their state fuel taxes.

Oregon’s state fuel tax is 38 cents a gallon.

These are not insignificant amounts when regular was averaging $5.31 a gallon Wednesday, June 29, in Umatilla County, according to AAA.

Suspending fuel taxes can have negative effects.

Much of the tax revenue pays to improve highways, roads and city streets, so a temporary reprieve now could mean bumpier roads later.

But trimming 56 cents from the price per gallon — if both the federal and Oregon state taxes went away for a few months — might well result in more gas being sold, which would partially offset the loss of tax revenue.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown’s reaction to Biden’s proposal was disappointing.

A statement from her office states in part that “with gas prices having jumped by several dollars per gallon over the last several months, it’s unlikely that Oregonians would see significant savings at the pump under this latest proposal.”

Notwithstanding the exaggerated “several dollars per gallon over the last several months” reference — in reality Oregon’s average price for regular unleaded is up by about $2.01 compared with a year ago — Brown’s blithe dismissal of Biden’s suggestion shows little sympathy for the plight of her constituents.

Although Oregon’s fuel tax accounts for about 7% of the current price, and the combined state and federal tax is about 10%, saving 56 cents per mile amounts to about $22 for every 1,000 miles driven at an average of 25 mpg. That’s not likely to make the difference for someone struggling to pay a mortgage, to be sure. But at a time when inflation has elevated the cost for pretty much everything, including necessities such as food and fuel, Brown’s skepticism suggests she doesn’t appreciate the cumulative effects of inflation or the value of even modest relief on the cost of one product.

The reaction of Brown’s counterpart in neighboring Washington state, Jay Inslee, was much more galling.

A spokesperson for Inslee, Jamie Smith, trotted out the claim oil companies are to blame, saying if Washington suspended its gas tax — which is 49 cents per gallon, third-highest among states — “the oil companies would be the ones to benefit from yet another opportunity to pocket more profit at the expense of our ability to put people to work fixing our roads and bridges.”

Oil companies have been making billions in profits this year, to be sure. But to imply this is directly related to prices we’re paying at the pump betrays at best an oversimplification, and at worst an ignorance, of economics and the global petroleum market.

As global economic matters tend to be, this one is much more complicated. Economics and industry experts say many factors have contributed to rises in oil prices and the record-high fuel prices, including supply chain delays and worker shortages that have reduced oil production, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and rising demand for fuel as the effects of the pandemic have eased.

The market works both ways. When oil prices plummeted early in the pandemic, corporate balance sheets reflected the trend. Exxon lost $22.4 billion in 2020.

Moreover, the Federal Trade Commission has investigated allegations of price gouging in the industry many times, most recently late last year, and invariably finds no legitimate evidence for it.

Ultimately, fuel tax “vacations” won’t be a panacea for drivers. But the savings are no less real just because they’re modest.

Anti-forestry lawsuit puts forests and communities at risk

NICK SMITH
OTHER VIEWS

Six anti-forestry groups are suing to block a new policy that would make it a little easier for the U.S. Forest Service to reduce wildfire risks and restore forest health on national forest lands in Eastern Oregon and Washington. In doing so, their lawsuit affects several projects that would conduct hazardous fuel reduction on at least 209,000 acres of land that’s vulnerable to severe fire.

The lawsuit aims to preserve an outdated and unscientific rule from the Clinton-era, known as the “Eastside Screens.” It originally imposed a temporary rule prohibiting the removal of trees larger than 21 inches in diameter on national forests east of the Cascades, including the Malheur, Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman, Deschutes, Ochoco and Fremont-Winema.

With little public involvement and no scientific justification, this temporary and arbitrary rule became permanent when it was amended into the management plans as standards for these federally-owned forests.

In theory the rule was intended to protect and improve forest conditions associated with old and mature forest habitat. But in practice, it made it harder for the Forest Service to remove tree species that compete with native pine and are less resilient to fire such as grand fir or white fir. This compelled the national forests in Eastern Oregon to pursue dozens of project-specific amendments to the 21-inch rule over the past 20 years in order to meet their desired forest conditions.

This arbitrary rule created an expensive and time-consuming process, and as a result, the Forest Service has struggled to keep pace with the growing risks and restoration needs of these forests, which places a variety of forest values and uses at risk.

During the 30 years of this temporary rule, anti-forestry groups enjoyed the status quo because it tied the hands of our public lands managers. They could also use it to block restoration projects they did not like, even if the science-based treatments were supported by collaboratives with diverse interests.

Rather than accelerate the trajectory of forests toward a late-seral structure, as sound forest management would help accomplish, this temporary, arbitrary and unscientific rule created forest conditions that are unnaturally dense and exacerbate risk to wildfire, insect and disease infestations, and drought.

Rather than lifting this rule completely, the Forest Service only made modest changes to its policy. In January 2021, the agency adopted the “Old Tree and Large Tree Guidelines,” which includes diameter limits for tree removal ranging from 21-inches to 30- inches, depending on tree species, and an overarching age limit on tree removal of 150 years.

In announcing their lawsuit, anti-forestry groups labeled this modest change as a “Trump-era” rule allowing wholesale “logging of old growth.” Yet the new guideline has given our public lands managers some flexibility to restore unhealthy forests by implementing science-based treatments that are appropriate to the landscape.

The Forest Service is using this new guideline to develop several projects on six national forests. One thing all of these projects have in common is their primary objective is not necessarily timber harvest, but hazardous fuels reduction and forest resiliency. Some projects are located in areas identified as Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) where the wildfire threat to communities is heightened.

It’s unfortunate these groups would sue to block projects that would improve the health of our forests and reduce the risks to our public lands and nearby communities. As climate change continues to impact our forests, the Forest Service should be doing everything possible to prevent large-scale, carbon-emitting wildfires, while maximizing the ability of our forests to sequester more carbon and store more carbon in both healthy trees and wood products.

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Nick Smith is the executive director of Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supporting active forest management on federal lands.

YOUR VIEWS

Founders could not abolish slavery but came closer than believed

Celebrating Juneteenth as the end of slavery also fulfills the aspirations of delegates to the Constitutional Convention. The founders could not abolish slavery but came closer than often believed. Slavery was retained, but delegates only agreed to suspend congressional initiatives until 1808 and expected it to vanish as a matter of moral obligation.

The philosophical doctrines consulted for founding this country already placed master and slave on the same natural plane of existence and only postponed the free exercise of conscience. It was reasonably believed planters would no longer be satisfied with luxuries, indolence and cruelties, but aspire to the profit, energy and incentives found in Northern methods of enterprise.

In reading James Madison’s notes, you find no defense of slavery, but two firm denunciations during debates that abhorred the institution.

“It was a nefarious institution. It was the curse of heaven on states where it prevailed,” Gouverneur Morris, of New York, said. “Compare Middle States where a rich and noble civilization marks prosperity and happiness with … great regions of slaves presenting a desert increasing in proportion to these retched beings.”

George Mason, of Virginia, said, “This infernal traffic originated in the avarice of British merchants ... Slavery discourages arts and manufactures ... Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant ... They bring the judgement of heaven on a country. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world, they must be in this.”

As an economically dying institution when the Constitution was approved, it seemed a not intractable problem to settle.

Nolan Nelson
Redmond

Women cannot be equal to men without the legal right to abortion

The overturning of Roe v. Wade is more than its parts. It is not simply a reversal of 50 years of precedent on reproductive rights for women. It is a repudiation of female equality in universum. It is a reclamation of male dominance over more than half of our population.

The right to oppose abortion has never been the issue. Opposing abortion is a reasonable position, and no one should ever feel obligated to terminate a pregnancy. But, abolishing the legal right to do so relegates all women to second class citizenship.

It is a platitude that if men endured pregnancy there would be no debate. Abortion would be the norm. Simply put, no man could have equal opportunity if some were required by law to undergo nine months of physical upheaval while others were not.

Women cannot be equal to men without the legal right to abortion.

Moral and religious objection should be heard and respected. Personal opposition to abortion is reasonable and proper, but one cannot support laws controlling reproductive rights for women unless he or she is also willing to confess a belief that women are inherently inferior to men.

Women must have complete control of their own bodies to have equality in our culture. It is reasonable to believe that this is guaranteed by the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. I believe the debate should not be about abortion, but whether as a society we recognize equality between the sexes.

Joseph Brusberg
Hermiston