

OUR VIEW

## Change of heart about VA plan is good news

Good news from Congress is often hard to come by, but the recent announcement from U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden's office that a plan to modify the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center in Walla Walla into an outpatient clinic is no longer an option was a bright spot among the usual fare of depressing information that leaks from the nation's capital.

Wyden said in a press release last week he "welcomed the news" that a group of bipartisan senators will block the plan originally configured by the veterans Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission. That plan would have shut down the 31-bed residential rehabilitation and treatment program and moved it to Spokane.

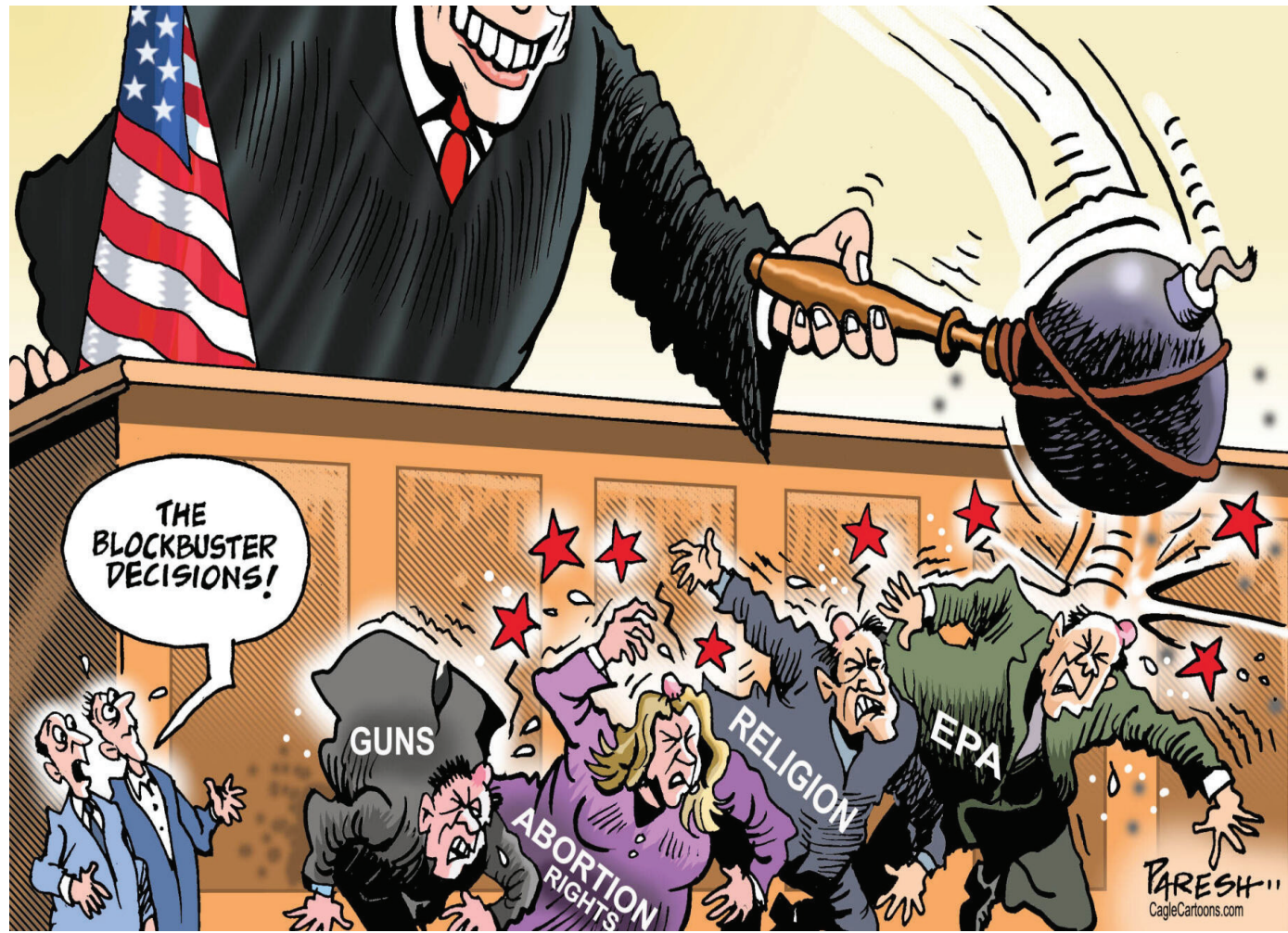
Wyden, in a recent town hall meeting, reported he'd heard from veterans about how the plan to turn the facility into an outpatient clinic would make a negative impact.

All the gratitude for the decision can't rest with Wyden, of course, as a number of other prominent senators also chimed in to stop the plan from becoming a reality. Yet, Wyden's influence surely was a factor, and we thank the senator for that assistance.

The fact is the concept was bankrupt from the very beginning. Why the federal government would want to shortchange our veterans on any issue is not only a mystery but grossly unfair. Surely money had a lot to do with the decision. It is no secret the costs of the Veterans Affairs continue to climb at an unprecedented rate. Taxpayers are ultimately billed for those costs, just like taxpayers end up footing the bill for any conflict the nation finds itself in.

Caring for our veterans is one of those unseen and often not talked about aspects of our foreign policy. When the call erupts across the nation to let slip the dogs of war, the upfront costs are always high. Yet when a conflict is over, those costs continue as the men and women who shouldered the burden need long-term, costly care.

We owe our veterans a great deal, including excellent health care. The fact the plan to turn the Walla Walla clinic into an outpatient center has been abandoned is good news.



## Yellowstone fires and floods and reframing catastrophes



BILL ANEY  
THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

The photos and videos of the rivers flooding on the north end of Yellowstone National Park last month gave a dramatic testimony to the power of nature.

The northern and northeastern entry points into the park are now closed, probably for years, and the damage has been labeled devastating, catastrophic, unprecedented, extreme — pick your apocalyptic adjective. The flood was caused by a very warm and wet rainstorm on top of the above normal late May snowpack, and this rain on snow event brought the creeks and rivers to flood levels not seen in over 90 years.

Major access roads and bridges were washed away, and it is difficult to imagine rebuilding roads in some of these narrow canyons. The Park Service is not willing to estimate the cost of such a project, and it will be years before access is restored.

Some of the words we use to describe this flooding are reminiscent of the ways we describe wildfires during fire season every year. In 1988, known as the year of the Yellowstone Fires, national evening news reports often started with a glum-faced news anchor describing the day's devastation of one of our national treasures.

During the first week of Septem-

ber 1988, Roger O'Neil of NBC News led the newscast with, "This is what's left of Yellowstone tonight," while Dan Rather of CBS and Tom Brokaw of NBC told the country that "Part of our national heritage is under threat and on fire" and "Our oldest national park is under siege."

The networks eventually changed their storyline to cover the amazing resilience of nature and the regrowth and recovery of Yellowstone as summer turned to winter and black landscapes turned to white and then green. Old Faithful continued to erupt on schedule, and anyone who has visits the park now likely will have a hard time seeing any trace of the 1988 fires.

During my career as a fire manager, ecologist and fire analyst, I tried to use my words carefully when it came to describing wildfire effects and caution others to do the same. Despite what you might read, wildland fires do not consume or destroy acres of land; the land is still there after the fire passes even though the vegetation is often changed dramatically. The word catastrophic evokes strong emotion without adding much to the description of fire effects and should probably only be used in a true tragedy, such as the loss of homes or lives.

In both flood and fire, we should remember that nature is doing what nature does. When humans build access roads in canyon bottoms next to rivers, we should expect them to be washed away occasionally, as rivers naturally flood and change course. When we

build homes, lodges and park visitor centers in the forest, we should expect some of these will burn each year. Summers in the west are hot and dry with occasional lightning, so fires are inevitable.

Fire managers, insurance companies, road engineers and savvy land use planners understand this. Bob Barbee, superintendent of Yellowstone National Park in 1988, told the nation that the fires simply were a force of nature and to fight them that summer was about as useful as trying to fight a hurricane or tornado. The best we could hope for was to protect those things we care about, including park buildings and other infrastructure, and wait for the weather to change.

As we enter the (thankfully) delayed fire season in 2022 in the Blues, listen for the words used to describe fire on the landscape. For most fires, the words devastation or catastrophic are so value laden as to be useless. No single acre of land has ever been lost to or consumed by a wildfire, although the landscape may look quite different without the same vegetation. This is what nature does and has always done, and the streams, forests and wildlife tend to recover from fires (and floods) quite well.

Keeping that perspective helps us to see natural events in a much different light.

*Bill Aney is a forester and wildlife biologist living in Pendleton and loving the Blue Mountains.*

YOUR VIEWS

### Jim Doherty needs to be part of a solution

I've read the recent articles on the Port of Morrow being fined by Oregon Department of Environmental Quality for over application of nitrogen. I've also read Morrow County Commissioner Jim Doherty's spin on blaming the high nitrates in the area solely on the Port of Morrow. Attached from one of those articles is a pie chart where the DEQ estimates where the nitrates come from.

The Port of Morrow along with food processing in Umatilla County accounts for 4.6%. The Port of Morrow handles the discharge water from food processors in Morrow County. This is the only group that is regulated by DEQ, and they are only a small portion of a bigger problem. Jim Doherty is a cattleman, and if I add the 8.1% from pastures with the confined animal feeding operations of 12.9%, I get 22% attributed to Jim Doherty's industry. Onsite, which is septic tanks and drain fields, is 3.9%. Jim has been targeting an area in rural

Boardman that is known to have high nitrate levels for decades. This is also an older development that would not meet today's standards. It is 1-acre lots with individual septic systems and shared wells. What are the chances that they may have failed septic systems that are contributing to their own problem?

The high nitrate issue has been around for decades. I can remember my friend Carol Michaels decades ago when she worked for Oregon State University Extension Service encouraging people in the area to check their wells for nitrates, and passing out literature at public events, such as the Irrigon Watermelon Festival and Morrow County Fair. State law that has been around for decades requires a test of the domestic well in any real estate transaction and the results be given to the buyer. This is not a new problem.

Jim was quoted as saying that before he and Commissioner Melissa Lindsay were elected, that the relationship between the Port of Morrow and county government was like the tail wagging

the dog. During my 12-year tenure as a county commissioner we had quarterly meetings with the Port of Morrow, city of Boardman and Morrow County. We met in the same room and tried to work on mutual problems for the public good. We didn't always agree on the solutions, but were always civil to each other. Not the screaming and yelling and finger pointing that Commissioner Jim Doherty likes to do. The emergency meeting that was called to declare the emergency barely met the public notice requirements. None of the regional partners, including the cities of Boardman and Irrigon, were notified. One can only wonder if that was done to exclude the public from participating. There was no reason for the fear mongering that has taken place. There was no reason to cast a shadow of doubt on city water, which is continually tested. Jim Doherty needs to be part of a solution and not just a finger pointer. If he wants to point the finger at the problem, he only needs to look in the mirror.

John Wenholz  
Irrigon

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