

COLUMN: Writer says Joseph gives him hope for small towns

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"When I first took a look, the people of Joseph and the surrounding area were at war with one another," Egan writes. "The white ranchers and loggers who long had control over the place were losing ground to global economic forces, and changes in how the federal government managed the big swath of public land in the area."

There were also tense relations with local environmentalists.

The columnist viewed a changed Wallowa County during his recent visit, though, just before Tamkaliks.

"The (EHS) Savages are now the Outlaws, per a vote of the students. And the Nez Perce have returned as a cultural and economic force, after working with whites in the area to purchase land at the

edge of the Wallowa River." And in Joseph, at the new-ish Josephy Center for Arts and Culture, "ranchers whose great-great-grandparents may have stolen land once vital to the Nez Percé sit side by side with Indians at brisk discussions of the past," writes Egan.

The Chieftain contacted a handful of prominent Wallowa County citizens for their reactions to Egan's written piece.

Joseph Mayor Dennis Sands had mixed feelings about the column. "After reading it the first time, I thought, 'Oh, there's some good publicity, some good words about Joseph.' But I read it again later, and I didn't feel quite as optimistic about it, although it's still a good article," the mayor said.

Sands said he thought Egan dredged up too many

negative ghosts from the past. "I really think it would have been better to concentrate on the present and the future. I did share it on my Facebook because I thought it wasn't a bad article, but some people might take offense at it," Sands said.

The mayor concluded that overall the article would have a positive effect on the way people perceive the community. "What's the saying: 'Any publicity is good publicity?'"

Rancher Joe McCormack, one of the very few Nez Percé who have settled in Wallowa County, saw the column as somewhat misguided. "I read the article and thought it was just full of general statements and kind of convoluted as far as substance. It had some inaccuracies that maybe if you're not from the county you won't pick up," McCormack said.

Tamkaliks is owned by a 501c3 called the Wallowa Band Nez Perce Trail Interpretive Center, not the tribe, McCormack pointed out. He added that about half the board of WBNPTIC is made up of county residents and about half Native Americans, including himself. In fact, McCormack said that only about "three or four" enrolled tribal members actually live in the county. "It's not like we came back here in big numbers," he said.

McCormack also disputed the idealized version of events Egan described in the renaming of the Enterprise High School sports teams from "Savages" to "Outlaws."

"The column is really just a glimpse of what's happened from 17 years ago to today. Nothing changed, really. We still have our battles. One thing that he (Egan) missed

that is very important is that we have established our own presence in terms of our fisheries department. I guess I don't see anything real wrong with the article, but I don't see anything good about it either," McCormack said.

Liza Jane McAlister, owner of the 6 Ranch near Enterprise, e-mailed this response:

"Interesting perspective from someone who spent a couple weekends here 17 years apart. This place is exceptional to all people who have made their home here. A passion for place can fuel a strong spirit. What Mr. Egan experienced was a small piece of a big county and a town that is doing what it needs to survive. He chose to use words that invoke strong emotions, but for me those are only a cover for his lack of experience and knowledge of this place. I would invite Mr.

Egan to dig wider and deeper before forming and sharing his opinion."

And rural Joseph rancher Cynthia Warnock offered this, also via e-mail:

"Small towns are struggling, but people still live in small towns because they like the small town atmosphere, they like the close community spirit. I don't think this article does Joseph justice. The writer has a way of condescending folks in a small town like stating 'those not clever enough to leave' or the 'loser down the street.' Most small towns are dying because of the constraints that have been put on ag and timber by those that live in the cities and think they should save the environment by having no impact on it (grazing or logging). The heritage of the Native Americans is not the only heritage that has been lost."

GRAZING: NRAC chair says science needs updating

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"The numbers are off."

Rancher and NRAC member Rod Childers seconded Warnock's observations, "Cynthia hit it on the head," he said. "I've been managing allotments for 36 years. In this district the communications between the range people and permittees has been excellent. We've done it right."

It was a statement that forest and rangeland officials readily agreed with. Tom Montoya, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest supervisor, acknowledged the exceptional working relationship enjoyed by Forest Service officials and permittees.

And yet, many permittees said, the documents gave them no recognition for upward trends. The plan proposes a desired future condition in the forest and a rating system for land recovery standards that would deem progress on allotments "unsatisfactory" despite steady progress.

This rating did not take into consideration years or even decades of work to re-establish a particularly difficult allotment that Forest Service officials readily admitted might not reach optimum levels within their lifetime.

Sabrina Stabler, team leader for the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision, assured permittees that the language of the document with regard to satisfactory and unsatisfactory results represented "goals."

"These goals are aspirational," she said. "I think there's an understanding in the plan that recognizes there are areas of land that might not see improvement in our lifetime."

That understanding was not made clear, permittees agreed.

"I think you need to make that clear in the plan," advised Childers.

Warnock agreed. "That (sort of understanding) becomes really subjective in a court," she warned.

Range Program Manager for the Wallowa-Whitman and Umatilla Zone Maura

Laverty assured the permittees that there "would be some wordsmithing," on the document to make the distinction between aspirational goals and standards that would trigger severe grazing limitations or closures. "We're committed to making a plan that works," she said.

As for the out-of-date science relied upon to make determinations in the plan, NRAC chairman John Williams did not mince words.

"There's a lot better science than what has been used to create this plan," he said. "The standards are based on papers written in 1999. The plan doesn't recognize that there could be successful grazing. This plan doesn't recognize what has happened since we put in the type of grazing we've had since the early 1980s. This plan needs to recognize that there can be successful grazing."

Science from 17 years ago no doubt contributed to the tone taken that appeared to deem grazing "bad."

Permittees and Forest Service officials alike agreed that grazing practices and overall management have drastically improved over the years. In the Wallowa District in particular, Montoya said, the partnership of agencies and permittees had been mutually supportive.

Ranchers pointed out examples of how they have not only worked hard to restore

grazing allotments to health, but to protect riparian zones, water flow and fish health, and protect the forests from wildfire.

"We're out there to keep that resource for the next generation," Childers reminded Forest Service officials.

The benefits of grazing to forest health was not recognized in the document at all, according to permittees. In fact, said citizen activist Raider Heick of Joseph, scientific reports used to create the plan seemed not to recognize that the forest was to be managed as a multiple-use resource.

"Multiple-use requires partners to achieve results," Heick said.

Permittees reminded the Forest Service officials several times that permittees were essential partners, particularly in minimizing the stock of fuels that would lead to catastrophic wildfires.

By demonizing grazing, setting standards that were beyond achievement within a lifetime, and failing to thin timber, particularly the "jack straw" that has choked riparian zones, the Forest Service was failing in management, permittees said.

The plan designers could do a lot better, permittees said, if they worked with the partners they had who were best situated to give quality field research data — the ranchers who were actually working "on the ground."

"There is more knowledge

in this room than in any number of degrees," said Heck. "I don't think the Forest Service is starting at a neutral position that recognizes both on-the-ground knowledge and specialized knowledge."

"The truth is on the ground," said rancher Tom Birkmaier. "The truth is always on the ground."

Childers immediately agreed. "Bringing regulatory people right here on the ground is the right thing. This needs to be done right."

Forest Service officials agreed and arrangements were made to begin the process of rewriting some of the language of the plan, updating information in light of more recent studies.

NRAC Chair John Williams agreed to be the contact person who would assist in the rewrite of the plan but insisted that the process be collaborative. Laverty confirmed that would be the case.

Forest Service officials also agreed to look into other points of discussion including over-encroachment by young timber across the forest and the difficulty of addressing erosion with slow-starting na-

tive grasses.

Ranchers offered to take regulatory people on tours so that they might actually see the situation on the ground. This idea had precedence and all in attendance agreed that this was a good idea.

"I thought it was a pretty good meeting," said Childers, after the event. "I appreciate the permittees coming in and I felt the Forest Service listened."

Warnock agreed. "I don't think it was pretense that they cared," she said. "I think they meant it. Now we'll see what the actions are."

In a telephone interview

following the meeting Laverty confirmed that arrangements were being made to bring regulatory agents to Wallowa County.

"We've got some new regulatory agency members we're working with and Sabrina Stabler, team leader for the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision, will be taking the lead on that. I believe she is committed to getting them out there to look at several issues," Laverty said. She also confirmed that NRAC Chairman John Williams had sent a list of more recent grazing studies. "I'll be looking at that, you bet," she said.



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