

# What happens when items make it into a landfill?

## REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE

Peter Ferré



**E**xciting news: The recycling center will now be able to accept rigid plastic six-pack holders in a special blue bin outside the plastics section. Be sure to place six-pack holders in the blue bin, not with the other plastics.

So, what happens to all the things that are dumped in a landfill because they were not reduced, reused or recycled?

The waste we each create does not somehow magically disappear when Rahn picks up our garbage cans or we dump our bins at Ant Flat. What really happens to all that “stuff” that we are throwing away? Well, here are a few simple facts that pertain to landfills like the one we have here in Wallowa County.

As bacteria break down the organic waste in our landfill, noxious gases are created.

Ninety to 98% of landfill gases that seep through the soil into our air are methane and carbon dioxide.

The remaining 2-10% of the leached

gases includes nitrogen, ammonia, sulfides, hydrogen and various other gases.

The production of these gases peaks 5-7 years after the materials are deposited, but a landfill can continue to produce noxious gases for more than 50 years.

According to the EPA, the methane produced by rotting organic matter in landfills is 20 times more powerful at trapping heat from the sun (the cause of greenhouse gas and climate change) than carbon dioxide.

Landfills produce 25% of all the methane gas linked to human activity.

Household cleaning products and e-waste that are deposited in landfills can produce toxic gases that can significantly impact air quality in the vicinity of the landfill.

As rainwater filters through the materials in a landfill a “garbage soup” is created.

“Garbage soup” is a term used to describe the highly toxic liquid formed when water from rain, snow melt, etc. filters through the waste as it breaks down in the landfill. This “garbage soup” can pollute the land, groundwater and waterways, presenting a current and future threat to the quality of groundwater.

The toxicity of this “garbage soup” can be dramatic.

Although many landfills are now constructed with liners and leachate collection systems, historically many landfills were constructed without these systems.

It is widely recognized that even the

best-installed plastic landfill liners will succumb to deterioration over time and will eventually allow these toxic liquids to be released.

You might ask, “Why all this negative information about landfills if they are such a common part of our lives?” Well, landfills with the toxicity levels of our current ones have not always been a part of our life, and they are having an unseen impact on our lives. Maybe if we join hands and aggressively ramp up our reducing, reusing and recycling efforts, landfills — and their potentially harmful effects — can be reduced and perhaps even eliminated.

Dealing with the solid waste (much of which is compostable, reusable or recyclable) that we each create is a big job, and the Friends of Wallowa County Recycling and the county’s Solid Waste Team need your help, and the help of your friends and family members.

Send us an email at [friendsofwallowacountyrecycling@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofwallowacountyrecycling@gmail.com) if you have an interest, and some time, to help with one of the objectives listed below, or you have ideas for other ways we all can lessen the waste we generate and improve the processing of the waste we do generate. Any amount of time you can share will be greatly appreciated.

The following are just a few of the objectives we are working on, and could use your help with:

- Reduce, reuse, recycle everything you can.

Helping transport materials:

- The plastic six-pack holders will need to be brought to Portland.

- We would like to begin collecting baling twine again that will need to be transported to the west side.

- To help lower costs we will be looking for volunteers willing to haul bales of recyclables to Hermiston, Spokane and other locations.

- Volunteering time at the recycle center helping sort materials, clean up, etc.

- Spring cleaning at the recycle center on Earth Day (April 22, 2021).

- Helping with our school and community education program.

- Help with implementation of \$38,000 recycling grant the county received.

- Fundraising to help us raise money for a storage shed, for modernized equipment to help us process more materials (a local citizen has committed \$25,000 of matching funds to the recycling program, so we need to find those matching funds).

- Help collect recyclables at county events when they resume.

Thank you for the difference you are making and for helping continue to expand that difference.

*Peter Ferré is a member of the Wallowa County Recycling Task Force.*

# Biden, Social Security, my retirement and the wealthy

## OTHER VIEWS

Tom Purcell



**I**t’s February. It’s cold. To fend off the winter blahs, I dream of one day retiring to a warm beach, where I’ll stand in the surf, sipping beverages from glasses with little umbrellas in them.

I spend hours using the Social Security Benefits Calculator to determine how much Social Security will pay me, after I’ve paid in many thousands of dollars throughout my working life.

And I wonder if my full Social Security benefits will be there when I retire, so I can afford to escape cold, gloomy winters.

It’s a realistic question. In 1950, there were about 16 workers paying into Social

Security for every person drawing benefits. Today, there are roughly two.

According to Kiplinger, “starting in 2021 the program’s annual costs will exceed its income from employee and employer payroll taxes and interest earnings. Once the program turns that corner, Social Security will begin drawing down assets in its trust funds to continue providing full benefits.”

If nothing is done, the trust fund will run dry by 2034 and will only be able to pay 76% of its promised benefits.

Worse, that would also take a heavy toll on elderly Americans who struggle to get by with Social Security as their primary income.

The Biden administration has a plan to prevent cuts and increase benefits for elderly Americans most in need — but wealthy Americans aren’t going to like it much.

Currently, workers pay a 6.2% Social Security payroll contribution on wages up to \$142,800; their employers pay an additional 6.2%. If you’re self-employed, like me, you pay the whole 12.4% — which we former

English majors refer to as “a lot!”

Social Security was considered an insurance program when it was created in 1936. Under its original classification, payroll contributions weren’t really “income taxes” at all, but “insurance payments” made throughout our working lives so we can get monthly retirement benefits until we die.

But some policymakers don’t see the program that way. They see it as too heavily funded by the middle class and not funded enough by the well-to-do.

Consider: A self-employed person who earns \$142,800 a year pays the exact same amount of Social Security taxes — \$17,707.20 — as someone who earns, say, \$10 million a year.

The Biden administration hopes to change that, by keeping the cap at \$142,800, but having the 12.4% payroll tax kick back in on incomes of \$400,000 and up.

In that scenario, a self-employed person earning \$10 million would be taxed 12.4% on the first \$142,800, nothing on income beyond that up to \$400,000, then an addi-

tional 12.4% on the rest of his income.

If my calculations are correct, his Social Security contributions would jump from \$17,707.20 to more than \$1.2 million — what we former English majors call “a heckuva lot.”

Forbes reports the change would affect about 800,000 buzzing-mad high earners.

I don’t know how such a large tax change would affect markets, investing, the economy and ultimately me. Frankly, government math makes my head hurt.

I just hope to goodness our policymakers, as divided as the rest of the country, will find a way to collaborate to bring a meaningful solution to the Social Security challenge, so that I may one day enjoy my retirement on a warm beach, sipping beverages from glasses with little umbrellas in them.

*Tom Purcell, author of “Misadventures of a 1970s Childhood,” is a Pittsburgh Tribune-Review humor columnist and is nationally syndicated.*

# The Blue Mountains are important to us

## OTHER VIEWS

Jeff Blackwood



**T**hese lands where we live help define us as individuals and communities.

With warming temperatures there are changes happening, however, to these lands we love.

The Blue Mountain Adaption Partnership was developed to identify climate change issues relevant to resource management in the Blue Mountain region. It is a partnership between the U.S. Forest Service, Oregon State University and the University of Washington. In 2017, the original findings were published by the USDA Forest Service in a report entitled “Climate Change Vulnerability and Adaptation in the Blue Mountains Region.” The 330-page report focused on hydrology, fish, upland vegetation and special habitats, chosen as areas of primary concern to our communities.

The vulnerability assessment concluded that “effects of climate change on hydrology would be especially significant.” Climate scientist predict that although overall precipitation may not change significantly in the mountains, more rain will mix with snow, especially in the mid-elevations. Spring snowmelt and runoff is already happening earlier, resulting in low summer flows occurring sooner in the summer. Coupled with longer, drier summers, this will affect downstream water use, fish, and other aquatic environments. Infrastructure, such as roads, trails, culverts and communities, will be impacted by more intense runoff from severe storms and rain-on-snow events.

Over the next few decades species, such as Chinook salmon, red band trout, steelhead, bull trout and other aquatic life may be drastically reduced in abundance and distribution. This will depend on local conditions of reduced streamflow and warmer water and air temperatures.

Increasing air temperatures, drier soils, and longer summers are projected to cause changes in vegetation, favoring those species that are more drought tolerant, such as ponderosa pine. A warmer climate will increase natural disturbances, such as insects, disease, and wildfire. The assessment predicts that with current trends, the annual acreage burned in the Blue Mountain region could be as high as six times the cur-

rent average by 2050. Grasses and shrubs, so important for wildlife and livestock, are maturing earlier in the summer. While providing some protection from late summer drought, this seasonal change means reduced nutrition for those dependent on fall forage for winter health. Drought-tolerant invasive grasses will continue to increase in abundance in forests and rangelands.

Finally, the assessment examined “special areas,” mainly wetlands and groundwater dependent ecosystems, predicting additional stresses as temperatures rise. Although these special areas make up a small portion of the landscape, they are rich in biodiversity and are key components of healthy watersheds.

Along with assessing vulnerabilities, the BMAP process recommended a host of adaptive practices. While they will not necessarily reverse current climate trends, these practices would be helpful in buffering and potentially reducing some adverse effects of climate change. These primarily focus on managing for healthy watershed and riparian conditions. Many of the recommended practices are being applied today by the various public agencies, tribes, and landowners. Thinning small trees, reducing fuel loads, prescribed burning, and streamside protections are activities being implemented today. It will take persistence, commitment and funding to invest in sustaining more resilient landscapes in The Blues.

These mountains and canyonlands are so valuable to so many of us, as well as being cornerstones for our regional cultures. Many of us had our first experience in the outdoors in these mountains, creating lifelong memories. These places and experiences embody our history, culture, and who we are.

Nature is not static. Over the past several decades, however, we have accelerated the pace of change. This will impact us all, whether our interests are in First Foods, recreation, making a living or the many more experiences yet to come. By understanding the changes, threats and opportunities with a changing climate, and applying the best science in practices and policies, we will be more successful in sustaining what we value in these nationally treasured lands.

Copies of the report are available for free by contacting USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, 1220 S.W. Third Ave., Suite 1400, Portland, OR 97208-3890, or by contacting local Forest Service offices.

*Jeff Blackwood retired from a career with the U.S. Forest Service. He is a member of the Eastern Oregon Climate Change Coalition.*

# Debates only make the process better

## OTHER VIEWS

Kevin Frazier



**O**ne of the best parts of law school is reading opinions, dissents and concurrences penned by the Supreme Court. They concisely and, oftentimes, creatively express some of the biggest questions facing our democracy.

One that’s come up repeatedly in my administrative law class: Did the Constitution create an effective, efficient and energetic government or did it set out a formula for ensuring accountability, adherence to bright-line rules and clear jobs for each branch of government?

You may be inclined to say the Constitution meant to do both. And you may be right. But the questions that reach the Supreme Court often don’t allow for that kind of answer.

For example, in *Free Enterprise Fund v. Public Company Accounting Oversight Board*, the Supreme Court did not have the luxury of finding the middle ground: Either the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board within the Securities and Exchange Commission was unconstitutionally removed from presidential oversight or it wasn’t.

Though that question may sound drier than the Alford Desert, its answer boiled down to whether the justices thought the Constitution should be read to allow Congress to create agencies tailored to address modern issues, or if its bright lines were never meant to be crossed, regardless of how the times had changed since 1789.

Supreme Court Justice Steven Breyer came out on the side of an action-oriented Constitution. He’s known for his creative metaphors, imaginative hypotheticals and, above all, his functionalism. In *Breyer’s dissent*, joined by three of his colleagues, he quoted Chief Justice Marshall in *McCulloch v. Maryland* (1819) and argued: “Immutable rules would deprive the government of the needed flexibility to respond to future exigencies which, if foreseen at all, must have been seen dimly.”

According to Justice Breyer, he and Chief Justice Marshall correctly realized the Framers aimed to create a Constitution that would “endure for ages to come,” which requires granting Congress the ability to respond to the “various crises of human affairs.”

On the other side, writing for the majority, Chief Justice Roberts channeled a formalist interpretation and made the case for a Constitution designed to frustrate speedy responses, if necessary to maintain bright lines between the branches. Citing Supreme Court precedent, Roberts asserted, “The fact that a given law or procedure is efficient, convenient and useful in facilitating functions of government, standing alone, will not save it if it is contrary to the Constitution, for convenience and efficiency are not the primary objectives — or the hallmarks — of democratic government.”

The fun (and frustrating) part about law school is that these justices are all persuasive, articulate and steeped in Supreme Court precedent. They rarely make bad arguments and they force even the most fierce functionalists to see some merit in a more formalist interpretation, and vice versa.

With a majority of the Supreme Court adopting a formalist interpretation, though, those who share Breyer’s view of democracy have a tough battle ahead. Count me among those who think our government ought to be guided by outcomes.

The wonderful part about our democracy is the people are the sovereigns. Functionalists and formalists alike agree all power exercised by the president, Congress and the Supreme Court is derived from the people. That means We the People — you and me — have the obligation and opportunity to make sure our power is used toward whatever objectives we view as the hallmarks of our democracy.

Outcomes-oriented governance is not easily accomplished. If some people advocate more persuasively or more persistently, their outcome might win the day. Which is why we ought to do all we can to bring more voices into the delegation of our collective power to our delegates.

Oregon has long championed finding ways to bring the people into the process of power sharing. From the initiative to automatic voter registration, the state has found ways to give people the chance to divvy out their share of power. Those innovations have paved the way for a lot of participation, but there are still some people who find it easier than others to distribute their power.

We can achieve an outcomes-oriented democracy if we can bring everyone into the fold. That’s why we need to lower barriers to folks simply looking to fulfill their role as sovereigns.

*Kevin Frazier was raised in Washington County. He is pursuing a law degree at the University of California, Berkeley School of Law.*