

Get serious about carbon and wildfire prevention

OTHER VIEWS

George Wuerthner



In early July, the largest wildfire in New Mexico history, the 340,000-acre Hermit Peak blaze, came to a quiet end.

What stopped the fire? Was it firefighting? Did the fire run into fuel breaks? Did thinning halt its spread?

What happened is that the summer monsoon rains began to fall in New Mexico, and the Hermit Peak Fire was quickly squelched.

It may seem counterintuitive, but the entire “fuels are the problem” and “logging is the solution” to wildfires are based on flawed assumptions.

While some proponents of “active forest management” admit that climate/weather is one driving force in fires, they seem to ignore or downplay the outsized influence of extreme fire weather. For example, the West is under the most severe drought in a thousand years.

There is a direct correlation between weather/climate and wildfire. Drought, temperature, wind and humidity are the

main factors in the spread of fires.

Furthermore, we have evidence that logging/thinning does not significantly influence wildfires around the West. The opposite is true. Places with substantial logging, including private timber lands, often burn at the highest severity.

Examples of wildfires that burned through areas with significant past “active forest management” include the Dixie Fire (California’s most significant fire in 2021), the Bootleg Fire (Oregon’s most enormous

fire in 2021), the Holiday Farm fire (which charred massive clearcut lands on the west slope of the Cascades in 2020), and the Camp Fire, which burned down the town of Paradise, California.

Many of the largest blazes do not even occur in forested landscapes, so that logging will have no influence. For example, the 281,000-acre Thomas Fire near Santa Barbara, the half-million-acre Long Draw Fire in Oregon, and the 280,000-acre Soda

Fire in Idaho, among others, burned mainly through chaparral or sagebrush shrub.

There are plenty of problems with logging as a solution.

First, logging is the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Oregon. Logging, therefore, creates the very conditions that exacerbate climate warming. Even burnt forests store significant amounts of carbon.

Second, no one can’t predict where a fire will occur, so the majority of all log-

example, most human ignitions occur on or near roads. Thus, the proliferation of logging roads that come with thinning/logging means more opportunities for unplanned ignitions.

And logging roads, because they favor the growth of flammable weeds, also become natural corridors for fire spread.

While it may be difficult to accept, we see the landscape “adapting” to drier conditions across the West. Drought, insects and wildfires are restoring evolutionary balance to the landscape plant communities by naturally selecting which vegetation can survive under the new climatic conditions.

If we wish to moderate or reverse this climate warning trend, we must get serious about reducing greenhouse gas emissions — including those from logging. Setting aside all national forests lands as “carbon storage” reserves would be a good first step.

Beyond this long-term solution, we can reduce human costs by controlling home development in the Wildlands Urban interface, hardening the home with fire-resistant construction materials, and removing flammable materials from the home site. Planning for emergency evacuations is also critical.

George Wuerthner is an ecologist who has published numerous articles and several books on wildfire issues.

“THERE IS A DIRECT CORRELATION BETWEEN WEATHER/CLIMATE AND WILDFIRE. DROUGHT, TEMPERATURE, WIND AND HUMIDITY ARE THE MAIN FACTORS IN THE SPREAD OF FIRES.”

ging/thinning projects never experience a blaze at the time when they “might” influence fire behavior.

Third, no forester with a paint gun marking trees for removal can tell which individual has genetic resistance to drought, bark beetles, disease or wildfire. Indeed, in many instances, logging reduces the “resiliency” of forests and degrades forest health.

Other factors also influence fires. For

The rising tide of inflation threatens to swamp Oregon’s public budgets

OTHER VIEWS

Tim Nesbitt



As prices and grocery bills have headlined the immediate effects of rising inflation on household budgets. But inflation has downstream effects that will swamp public budgets as well, eroding the capacity of state and local revenues to sustain support for vital services.

In Oregon and neighboring states, consumer prices rose 8.8% year over year in June, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Gas prices increased a whopping 52%. The price of food at home rose 13%. Those are the volatile components of the consumer price index, which are prone to ups and down over the course of a year.

The cost of other items, like medical care and housing, are harder to reverse. Those were up about 6%, embedding a new and higher trend line of cost increases in sectors of the economy that are heavily dependent on public spending (health care) and public

policy interventions (homelessness).

Almost all of the political responses to inflation have focused on short-term mitigations, such as gas tax holidays, or mid-term strategies to repair the supply side of the economy. A thoughtful compilation of the best responses was recently posted by Gary Conkling on the Oregon Way website.

But not enough attention has been paid to the consequences for government budgets and public services as we move from a decade of steady growth, low inflation and easy money to a period in which costs rise faster than revenues, money tightens and demands for government services and responses increase.

This is not a problem unique to Oregon by any means. But the structure of Oregon’s government finances creates unique vulnerabilities for our state.

First, we have constrained local property tax revenues with a hard cap of 3% on year-to-year increases, thanks to the combined effects of Measure 5 (1990), Measure 47 (1996) and Measure 50 (1997). As wages rise to keep up with the rising cost of living in the labor-intensive operations of schools, cities and counties, revenues will fail to keep pace, and the purchasing power of local budgets will shrink.

This effect was highlighted as a major

concern by the state’s Task Force on Comprehensive Revenue Restructuring in 2009. It’s a problem that will first affect schools and local governments in Oregon; but it will also put more pressure on the state to backfill school budgets and come to the aid of cities and counties to maintain public safety and health.

Second, both state and local governments will feel the inflationary effects of higher borrowing costs, higher health care costs and, most tellingly, the costs of the still massively underfunded Public Employees Retirement System.

Legislation enacted in 2019 stemmed the rise of PERS pension costs for government workers in Oregon at an average of roughly 25% of payroll, paid in full by their public employers. But this year’s inflation-induced stock market declines have again decimated the fund’s reserves to pay future benefits. And if salaries rise above the system’s assumed trend line of 3.5%, the cost of benefits, which are keyed to salaries, will rise in tandem. This is a double whammy that, absent further corrections, will almost certainly force the system’s claims on public budgets to 30% of payroll or more by 2025 and beyond.

Oregon has some advantages to deal with the tsunami-like effects of inflation. Its

income tax system only partially offsets the effects of inflation on its top brackets. So as wages and incomes rise, even if they lag inflation, state revenues will rise as well.

Also, there are record levels of reserves in state coffers. But the state will need those reserves to help schools maintain their staffing levels, adjust to higher costs for Oregon Health Plan providers, protect service levels for public safety and maintain its own level of services for Oregonians.

Inflation rarely raises boats; more often it swamps the most vulnerable households and stops dead in the water the forward progress of government programs. That’s the new challenge for our elected leaders, especially the new generation of legislators who came of age in the kinder fiscal climate of the last dozen years.

An era of rising revenues and the expansion of public services may be approaching an end, and an era of retrenchment and bailing out budgets may be just beginning.

Tim Nesbitt, a former union leader in Oregon, served as an adviser to Govs. Ted Kulonogski and John Kitzhaber and later helped to design Measure 98 in 2016, which provided extra, targeted funding for Oregon’s high schools. This column originally appeared on the Oregon Capital Chronicle website.

Wellness stretches beyond physical well-being

IT’S ABOUT HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Ann Bloom



The month of August is National Wellness Month, a month devoted to focusing on self-care and making every day count toward a lifetime of wellness, not just physical well-being, but also mental health and spiritual well-being, too.

Wellness can include developing healthy habits and routines and managing stress. Wellness has a way of promoting happiness. Small changes can affect your health in big ways. According to the Kim Foundation, an organization devoted to well-being and healthy living, it can take 21 days for something to become a habit and 90 days for it to become a lifestyle change.

The foundation’s website (www.kim-foundation.org) also lists being mindful, practicing self-compassion, focusing on proper nutrition, and trying something new as ways to focus on wellness.

Starting small with things you enjoy and working on making them a habit results in wellness. For example, taking a yoga class, treating yourself to an in-home spa treatment, such as a soak in a tub of homemade bath salts, or learning to meditate, are all ways to start on a path to wellness.

Other things that lead to wellness include increasing your water intake and upping fruit and vegetable consumption. Cutting back on added sugar is another way to improve nutrition. The average American consumes 22 teaspoons of added sugar a day; this includes sugar in sodas, but also hidden sugar in salad dressings, condiments and bread. Walking is a simple and effective tool for stress management, as is gardening or any other

form of physical activity, especially ones that get you outside interacting with nature.

Check your sleep habits — getting enough sleep so you feel rested and alert contributes to a sense of overall wellness and mental clarity. Spending time with family and friends also contributes to a state of wellness.

Finding a hobby, especially one not connected to your usual work, can also help develop a sense of wellness. For example, if your work is physical you might try a hobby that involves using your hands such as painting or woodworking.

Practicing the art of gratitude and reflecting on what you do have and focusing on the positive, rather than on the negative or what you don’t have can affect one’s mood and attitude for the good, which in turn will have a positive effect on overall wellness.

Doing volunteer work such as working at an animal shelter benefits both you and the animals. It releases “feel good” endorphins in the brain and the animals benefit from human companionship. And who knows? You might just meet your new best friend and a deserving pet will find their forever home.

Too much screen time can not only be bad for your eyes, but it can also be a real wellness damper if you are focusing on all the negativity on the news and social media. If you find yourself doing this, try limiting the time you spend watching TV and on your computer with social media.

Nothing helps one’s wellness level like a treat such as lunch with a friend to catch up, a new book, a latte, a new hairstyle or a massage — special something that makes you feel good. Strive for wellness not only in August, but every month of the year.

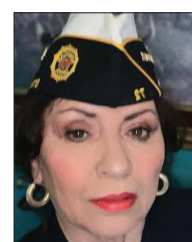
Ann Bloom lives in Enterprise and has worked for the OSU Extension Service for 15 years as a nutrition educator. She studied journalism and education at Washington State University.



Youth needed for Legion posts to continue

KRUSE POST 72

Maria D. Tye



The history of the three American Legion posts in Wallowa County is leading to a lot of historical information. The posts started in 1919 were the Chief Joseph Post in Enterprise and the Kruse Post 72 in Wallowa.

The Chief Joseph Post building burned down in the 1950s and the third post is Wallowa Lake Post 157 in Joseph, which was chartered in 1953. There is mention of the Chief Joseph Post in the meeting minutes referring to it as the post in Enterprise. I was speaking to Mike Teece, commander of the Wallowa Post 157, and he will be assisting me in obtaining information.

We lost a member of the Kruse Post 72 last year, Wayne Wolf, a veteran of World War II. This last month we lost another

member, Thorval Burrows, who served during the Korean era. Both active posts have been losing our most senior members. We mourn their passing, but we know they are looking down on us and smiling. The American Legion posts have endured much sorrow and much joy because of our senior members who persevered in the tasks of community involvements and ensuring we instill our patriotic beliefs.

The American Legion is dwindling in membership, and we need to welcome our younger generation of veterans to join in keeping our posts alive, so perhaps starting a Sons of the Legion (SOL) is a possibility. They will learn flag etiquette, the Constitution and participate in many American events. We can then ignite patriotism in our younger generation.

To be eligible for the SOL you must be a child or grandchild of a veteran. I’ll provide more in-depth information next time. Please provide any information you think pertinent to our column’s mission.

Maria D. Tye is the commander for Kruse Post 72 in Wallowa.