

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Wildfires aren't all inevitable

Miners Jubilee weekend offered a brief, and relatively minor, respite to the heatwave that descended on Baker County after Independence Day.

But though the temperature on Friday, Saturday and Sunday didn't quite reach 90 degrees after eight straight days in the 90s, the weather brought no rainfall to even temporarily curb the potential wildfire hazard.

We use the word "potential" here for a particular reason.

Although the hot, dry weather that has dominated July has created conditions conducive to a fire spreading, the sunbaked grasses, shrubs and trees are no more likely to spontaneously combust than they were several weeks ago.

Fires, in almost every case, still require a spark (we understand that microbial activity in haystacks can create fires, but we're confining our discussion here to more conventionally kindled blazes).

We've noticed, in reading media coverage and public commentary about the fires that have already ravaged parts of Oregon — most notably the Substation fire near The Dalles, which killed one resident who was trying to protect a neighbor's property — a sort of resignation regarding destructive blazes. The sense seems to be that such fires are inevitable, and that the warming climate, and the resulting shrinkage of average snowpacks, mean Oregon will endure more and bigger blazes that will start earlier in the summer.

Certainly there is nothing we can do to prevent lightning, which supplies the aforementioned spark for more than half the wildfires most years in Northeastern Oregon (and something like 80 percent, typically, on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest).

But human-caused fires are absolutely preventable. And most of the big blazes in Oregon this year — including the Substation fire — were caused by people rather than by lightning. The hot, dry and windy weather contributed to these fires' growth, but the weather didn't cause them.

The advice that most of us have heard, from Smokey and from other sources less, well, furry, bears repeating, so to speak.

Be careful out in the woods and the rangelands. Some precautions are obvious — if you light a fire, when that's allowed, do so in a fire ring or other place designed for the purpose. Watch for embers and never leave a fire unattended until it's dead out. Don't toss cigarettes from a car window.

But other potential firestarters aren't quite so obvious. Mufflers and catalytic converters on low-slung vehicles can easily ignite dry grass or brush. Even a discarded glass bottle can concentrate sunlight and start a fire.

The point here is that we're not helpless. Yes, it's hot and dry and occasionally windy. But hereabouts that trio of adjectives pretty aptly describes July and August. We've gotten through plenty of hot and dry summers without having any big blazes. If we're all cautious, there's no reason that can't happen again.

From the Baker City Herald editorial board. The board consists of editor Jayson Jacoby and reporter Chris Collins.



Heated up about cooling costs

NICOLAS LORIS

Sweltering summer heat means families across the country have their air conditioners on full blast in their homes and in their cars. Unfortunately, if the Senate ratifies the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol, the price tag for running, repairing and replacing your AC could get a whole lot higher.

The 1987 Montreal Protocol was an agreement to phase out production of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), believed harmful to the ozone layer. The Kigali Amendment is a United Nations treaty that would ban CFCs' replacement, hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) and substitute hydrofluoro-olefins (HFOs).

But a phase-out won't come cheap. The Kigali Amendment would impose significant costs on American households and businesses.

New air conditioning units for home- and car-owners will be considerably more expensive. In addition, maintenance and repairs of the hundreds of millions of existing HFC-using units would likely increase as the supply of HFCs shrinks and prices rise.

Cato Institute's Dr. Pat Michaels illustrated the costs a typical American family would incur by comparing a cheap HFC unit to an expensive HFO (Solstice) one. "HFC-134a, out of patent and made in China, goes for a bit under \$7 per pound" Michaels writes. "Solstice costs \$71. A 3500-square-foot house's heat pump will require approximately 15 pounds, or \$105 worth of HFC-134a, but a whopping \$1,056 worth of Solstice, and that's without installer markup. A similar ratio applies to the three pounds that a car air conditioner uses."

While prices of HFC replacements are likely to fall over time with more widespread use, the cost disparity will

still be significant. Even if the costs for HFOs are cut in half, that's potentially hundreds of dollars more for a family to fix or replace an air conditioner.

Higher prices won't be restricted to just your house or vehicle AC unit, either. Commercial air conditioning units would also be subject to the phase-out, which would adversely harm businesses nationwide. As Laura Mandala, CEO of Mandala Research, said of the impact of the phase-out on the hotel industry, "Alternatives will be more expensive and may require equipment replacement and modification. It is not unreasonable to expect that the costs associated with this will ultimately get reflected in hotels' average daily rate."

Millions of small businesses that rely on air conditioning and/or refrigeration, such as restaurants and convenience stores, will be similarly impacted, as will their customers. Businesses will pass those costs on to consumers. Or if a company can absorb the costs, higher prices will prevent businesses from investing and expanding. Either way, it's a losing deal.

Failing to ratify Kigali wouldn't prevent companies from selling Kigali-compliant products to other countries that have chosen to phase out HFCs. So long as a domestic company chooses to produce HFOs or another compliant chemical, they could sell their product to any of those countries. That includes selling in the U.S.

Instead, refusing to ratify Kigali will ensure that Americans have more choices. Homeowners or businesses buying or repairing an AC unit will

have the option of purchasing HFCs or costlier HFOs.

Unsurprisingly, the air-conditioning and refrigeration industry has broadly supported ratification of Kigali. The amendment offers a clear opportunity for profit, as households and businesses are forced to purchase new air-conditioning and refrigeration systems that use new alternative coolants to replace the HFC units being phased out.

But that's not the way to create jobs and grow the economy. If it were, the U.N. should get to work on a treaty that replaces your windows with break-proof glass. Think of all of the new business for glass and repair shops! In the world of refrigerants, HFCs are the unbroken, perfectly usable window.

In fact, Kigali has little to do with protecting the ozone layer. Studies conducted in the 1990s found that HFCs had zero effect on ozone depletion. A 2015 NASA study says the ozone depletion factor of HFCs isn't nothing, but isn't cause for alarm, either. NASA estimates that HFCs will cause a 0.035 percent decrease in ozone by 2050. Such a very weak ozone-depleting factor is not justification for a costly, widespread ban.

President Donald Trump shouldn't bother sending the Kigali Amendment to the Senate for ratification. But if he does, the Senate should subsequently reject it. Major air-conditioning and refrigerating companies may not like it, but your wallet will.

Nicolas Loris is The Heritage Foundation's Herbert and Joyce Morgan Research Fellow, specializing in energy, environmental and regulatory policy analysis.

Your views

Walden was right to back pardon of Hammonds

I support Greg Walden for his efforts and success in which he lobbied the White House for the pardon of Dwight and Steven Hammond. Thank you also to the Oregon Cattlemen's Association and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke who also supported the Hammonds.

It seems that the Obama administration was overzealous in going after the Hammonds. The Hammonds are not terrorists, they're ranchers. They know how to take care of the land because it's their

livelihood. That administration obviously did not understand ranching or even the West for that matter. The Trump administration knows and appreciates ranching communities and what they can provide.

I also agree with what Greg Walden said about President Trump's decision for the pardon. He said the decision was "a win for justice, and an acknowledgment of our unique way of life in the high desert, rural West."

Patty Trost
Unity

Letters to the editor

We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Letters are limited to 350 words. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days. Writers must sign their letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Email letters to news@bakercityherald.com.

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Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

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Baker City Hall: 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers. Mike Downing, James Thomas, Loran Joseph, Randy Schiewe,

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Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Fred Warner Jr., city manager; Dustin Newman, police chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

Baker County departments: 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Jeff Smith, roadmaster; Matt Shirtcliff, district attorney; Alice Durlflinger, county treasurer; Cindy Carpenter, county clerk; Kerry Savage, county assessor.

Baker School District: 2090 4th Street, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-524-2260; fax 541-524-2564. Superintendent: Mark Witty. Board meets the third Tuesday of the month at 6 p.m., Baker School District 5J office boardroom; Andrew Bryan, Kevin Cassidy, Chris Hawkins, Katie Lamb and Julie Huntington.