

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

When a tax cut is tax 'entrapment'

Politics is a strange endeavor, and rarely has it been stranger than during the era of Trump. But it's still curious to read that Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden is riled up because the federal government took less of the money that millions of Americans earned in 2018.

Which is to say, our senior senator apparently would prefer that your paychecks were smaller last year.

This is not a common position for any politician, of any party, to profess publicly, as Wyden did in a press release Tuesday.

The situation is rather more involved, to be fair.

But Wyden's latest complaint about the Trump administration seems to be prompted more by the chance to score partisan points than by any legitimate concern that taxpayers have been treated shabbily by their government.

The issue, as you've probably read about, including last week in the Herald, has to do with tax refunds people are receiving.

Or in some cases, not receiving.

Millions of middle-class taxpayers are likely to receive a smaller refund in 2019 than they did the previous year, even if their gross income didn't change substantially. Some are having to pay rather than get a check back.

Wyden and other Trump critics have pounced on this to imply that Trump's vaunted 2017 tax reform law was a sort of financial Trojan Horse.

The reality is the vast majority of taxpayers who have been or will be unpleasantly surprised by their 1040 form this year kept more of their earnings in 2018, which was of course the main selling point of the law.

In his press release, Wyden complained that the "Trump administration chose to under-withhold taxes from millions more Americans than is typical." This suggests that federal agents are responsible for filling out taxpayers' W-4 withholding forms.

In fact the IRS, back in April 2018, issued

a press release urging several groups of taxpayers, including couples who have children or who both have jobs, to review their withholding, based on the new law, to ensure enough tax was withheld to prevent them from owing the government in 2019.

It's clear that a lot of people either didn't hear, or didn't heed, this advice. This is hardly surprising, considering many people think about taxes only during refund season.

To his credit, Wyden was aware that changes in the law could affect taxpayers in ways they might not expect. On July 31, 2018, in responding to a government report showing that the withholding change could reduce, or eliminate, some taxpayers' refunds in 2019, Wyden described the report as an "alarm bell."

The senator might have made that alarm even louder by suggesting his constituents, many of whom were bringing home larger paychecks throughout 2018 due to the tax cut, plan ahead by saving some of that extra money they were receiving each payday.

But that would have made it more difficult for Wyden to lambaste Trump as he did this week, referring to the situation, in a laughably inappropriate analogy, as "tax penalty entrapment."

The bottom line here is that for most taxpayers, regardless of whether their refund shrank or went away, they kept more of their earnings, and the federal government took less, than in 2017.

This is what the term "tax cut" means.

Wyden's overbaked rhetoric notwithstanding, his call for the feds to waive late payment penalties for taxpayers who have a tax liability but who, in his words, "did not attempt to game the system," is reasonable.

But the government has already taken steps to do just that. The IRS recently announced that taxpayers would be exempt from such penalties if they timely pay at least 85 percent of any tax they owe.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



Your views

Carbon cap will devastate Baker County's economy

Baker County and the surrounding rural areas will be greatly impacted by HB 2020, the carbon cap-and-trade bill. This is not just a one-time tax — it is a forever tax that will impact and devastate industry, ranch and farm jobs in Eastern Oregon and Baker County.

I wish to thank the state Legislature for the outreach hearing that you held here in Baker City. There were a great many people that wanted to speak against the bill but the time limit and overcrowding by more than 300 people and only a few got to vent their frustrations.

I truly believe the bill is about a tax and is not directed at a problem, which there is none. Back when Oregon was part of the inland sea, volcanoes vented into the sea spewing tons upon tons of carbon dioxide into the air and sea saturating the landlocked retreating seas with the carbon dioxide combined with calcium rich

sea beds creating thousands of feet of limestone here in Baker County and surrounding area.

All of the carbon restrictions on motor vehicles taxing the fuel is just about tax and control. If we had pollution problems like in the far east, like China and India where smog is prevalent, then we have a problem. But to tax Americans because other countries pollute is ridiculous and is all about the tax money and control.

Oregon's counties have been engulfed in forest fires ravaging the national forests burning thousands of acres. Each tree that burns give up all of the carbon dioxide that it has absorbed in its life time, pouring CO² into the air. If you want to tax someone tax the Forest Service for massive CO² and carbon-ash pollution and mismanagement of our national forests.

All of these are facts and can be verified.

Chuck Chase
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Belated winter and the snowshovel search

This winter had been so benign that not only did I forget we owned two snowshovels, I couldn't find the one shovel I thought we had.

This was back in balmy January, when a snowshovel was about as useless as a copy of the "Communist Manifesto" at a Trump rally.

I didn't need the shovel.

Either of them, come to that.

But it occurred to me that although I remembered propping a shovel beside the back door several weeks earlier, when the prospect of snow was at least climatically conceivable, I couldn't recall the last time I had seen the thing.

Turns out it was in the rear of our FJ Cruiser. I had put it there in the event — one all but guaranteed, actually, considering my judgment — that I got mired in a drift while messing around in the mountains and needed to unearth a tire or perhaps an axle.

You might remember January.

During the ostensible depths of winter, Baker County basked in unseasonable warmth.

The average high temperature that month at the Baker City Airport was 40.6 degrees — more than 6 degrees above average, and the sixth-warmest since World War II.

Much of the nation east of the Rockies, meanwhile, was slowly succumbing to the deprivations of the



JAYSON JACOBY

dreaded polar vortex, a term that TV weather people have taken up in a big way.

(And a term that, inexplicably, was never claimed by a 1970s punk band. At least not so far as I know.)

People in places such as Minnesota were being stopped for no gain by northerly gales.

Hardware stores were selling out of thermometers with the Kelvin scale.

In Baker, by contrast, the temperature rose most days to levels that we wouldn't think terribly inappropriate in, say, May.

The high at the airport topped 40 on 18 of the 31 days. There were just three days — the first three of the month — when the temperature didn't surpass 32.

The trend continued into February — but only barely.

The first three days were all warmer than 40, but then the first in a series of storms — actual winter storms — swept inland, propelled by the atmospheric bellows that is the jet stream.

These saturated storms were

accompanied, at times, by pulses of that comprehensively chilled Canadian air that had lured so many parka-clad TV personalities onto Midwestern sidewalks and parking lots to perform such dubious experiments as trying to smash frozen eggs.

(They don't do much, which apparently is exciting. I prefer my eggs fried over-easy, and served in a climate-controlled kitchen with a side of gently browned toast.)

Four days after the high reached 48 — on Feb. 3, the warmest day of the month — it plunged to 4.

And although it never got quite so cold again, much of the rest of February was more notably wintry than January.

The average high temperature was about 4 degrees colder than in January — by a wide margin the biggest difference between the two months on record at the airport.

Eventually I ended up needing the shovel.

One of them, anyway, as I lack both the strength and the coordination to wield two shovels, simultaneously, in a way that accomplishes anything except possibly grievous damage to my shoulders.

But even with the belated arrival of weather typical for the season, this winter fell short of the standard set two years ago.

The winter of 2016-17, with its 3-foot-deep drifts and many days of sub-zero temperatures in Baker City, remains the most memorable of the 21st century.

But it turns out that in the mountains, this winter has in some respects surpassed its predecessor.

(And in some cases the edge of the mountains. I have recently seen photos from Pine Creek, at the base of the Elkhorns, in which incessant snow has transformed entire automobiles into white humps.)

The blizzards of February have boosted the snowpack — the region's greatest reservoir — in many places to levels above where they were two years ago.

The winter of 2016-17 stands out for what it wrought in Baker County's valleys — even the Eagle Valley, normally the area's banana belt, dealt with hip-high drifts — rather than for what transpired in the mountains.

The difference between the two winters has been especially noteworthy in the Elkhorn Mountains and in the southern half of the Wallows.

At Schneider Meadows, in the Wallows north of Halfway, for instance, the water content of the snow, as of Thursday, was 35 inches.

That's 6 inches more than was there on the same day in 2017.

The water content now is also greater than it was two years ago at Eilertson Meadow and Bourne in the Elkhorns.

Still and all, it strikes me as interesting how different the effects of — and our perceptions of — weather can be over a relatively short distance.

The phenomena aren't limited to snowpack, either.

On late Monday and early Tuesday of this week, for instance, the margin between winter and spring was quite narrow.

Warm air riding southerly winds pushed through the Treasure Valley but never quite made it to Baker City. At 5 p.m. on Monday, the temperature at the Baker City Airport was 32 degrees, while at the Ontario Airport it was 55.

The gap continued to widen after a cold front barged through Baker Valley late Monday. At 1 a.m. Tuesday it was 10 degrees at the Baker City Airport. At Ontario, where the front had yet to arrive, it was 44.

And at that very instant my snowshovel — the red one, that is — was occupying its accustomed spot beside the door, its scratched plastic surface encrusted with the icy remnants of my latest drudgery in the driveway.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.