

# Opinion

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## EDITORIAL

# Merkley on right track with forests

Sen. Jeff Merkley has ambitious ideas about making federal forests healthier and less susceptible to the sorts of horrendous wildfires that devastated parts of Oregon in September 2020.

Ambitious, and good.

The Oregon Democrat hopes to leverage his position as chairman of the Senate Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee, the post he's held since February, to boost by billions of dollars the federal government's budget for work such as thinning overcrowded forests and lighting prescribed fires to reduce fuel loads.

That's precisely what millions of acres of federal forests need in Oregon — including across parts of the Blue Mountains in our northeast corner of the state.

During a conference call with reporters last week, Merkley said he will lobby the Biden administration to spend at least \$1 billion more each year on such projects.

That's a large sum.

But the task is bigger still.

In Oregon alone, Merkley said, forest improvement projects totaling 2 million acres have already gone through the environmental review process but are awaiting money. The estimated cost: \$388 million.

This would seem to be an ideal time for Merkley to make his pitch. The scars from the terrible Labor Day weekend fires have barely begun to heal. Drought persists, with fire danger likely to reach extreme levels in much of Oregon this summer.

Moreover, as the senator mentioned, Biden is proposing to spend vastly larger amounts of public money — more than \$2 trillion — on infrastructure and other projects.

"Any plan to boost America's infrastructure, create jobs, and protect lives and our economy must include responsible forest management," Merkley said.

It's no revelation, certainly, that federal forests are ailing in many areas. Merkley himself, along with Oregon's other U.S. senator, Ron Wyden, and former Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., have advocated for more than two decades for a more aggressive approach in dealing with this dilemma. Our forests, and our economy, will benefit if Merkley secures significant financial backing for the campaign.

—Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



# We need details from Wuhan

By Doyle McManus

Last week, President Joe Biden set an example that all of us — Democrat and Republican alike — should embrace.

It wasn't so much what he did — ordering U.S. intelligence agencies to take a new look at the origins of COVID-19, including whether the coronavirus that causes the disease escaped accidentally from a laboratory in China — as it was the mindset that prompted his action.

For more than a year, debate about the origins of the virus has been deeply political, with former President Donald Trump and many of his followers embracing the lab-leak hypothesis, while many of his detractors scoffed at the idea.

Biden took a refreshingly different approach: He's keeping his mind open to both possibilities and asking for more information to get closer to the truth.

When COVID-19 appeared in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019, most scientists' first guess was that it came via an animal-to-human transfer, because that has been a frequent route for viruses to spread.

Chinese officials said the source of the pandemic appeared to be a "wet market" that sold live animals. Wuhan is home to a government-run research center that specializes in studying coronavirus, but officials there said the strain found in humans didn't match anything they were working on.

Some scientists said the possibility of a lab leak shouldn't be ruled out, and China hawks led by Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., said the theory deserved more attention.

Trump initially ignored the issue and even praised China's government for its "transparency." But in the spring of 2020, as the pandemic spread uncontrolled across the United States, he began to blame Beijing for what he called the "China plague."

He told reporters that he had seen

secret intelligence suggesting the virus came from a lab. "I think they made a horrible mistake and they didn't want to admit it," he said.

Trump's political motive was transparent. He was under fire for his administration's chaotic response to the pandemic and he needed someone to blame. "It's China's fault," he said.

And after years of outlandish falsehoods from the president, it was difficult for Trump's critics to believe him, especially in the absence of any publicly available evidence.

What was often lost, though, was that there was little direct evidence to support either the lab-leak or the wet market hypothesis. The virus's origin remained stubbornly undetermined — a frustrating fact for those who yearned for a clear, uncluttered narrative.

Over time, paradoxically, that absence of new evidence shifted the scientific debate. Researchers spent months trying to determine what species had spread the coronavirus to humans, and came up empty-handed; maybe the lab-leak theory wasn't so unlikely after all.

Meanwhile, China's government remained uncooperative toward outside inquiries. An international team sent by the United Nations' World Health Organization got only limited access to the Wuhan Institute and its databases. The WHO chief said the results of the visit were inconclusive: "All hypotheses remain open and require further study." That prompted several groups of scientists, including some who had been skeptics about a lab leak, to write open letters urging a new look at all the possibilities.

In Washington, the U.S. intelligence community had already told Biden — and Congress — that it was divided: Two agencies still leaned toward animal-to-human transmission, one favored the lab-leak idea, but none were certain.

So the president asked them to look again and report back in 90 days.

That didn't add up to a major change in policy — only an admission that after more than a year, we don't know much more than when the pandemic began. Francis Collins, the director of the National Institutes of Health, repeated his unchanged diagnosis last week: "It is most likely that this virus arose naturally, but we cannot exclude the possibility of some kind of lab accident."

This new inquiry may just end in more uncertainty. And even if a scientist or spy finds conclusive proof of how the virus came to be, that won't change the course of the pandemic, or what governments are doing to combat it.

But it could have consequences in other ways. If the virus came from a lab, there will be a worldwide demand for tougher security standards, not only in China but every other country that does virus research as well. There will be renewed debate over the wisdom of "gain of function" experiments — research that deliberately makes viruses more potent as a step toward devising defenses. And China's authoritarian government, which has claimed to deal better with the pandemic than democratic countries, will suffer a serious loss of influence and prestige.

Meanwhile, there are lessons here for the rest of us. In scientific disputes, resist the temptation to choose a side based on the politics of the moment; wait until the evidence comes in. And get used to ambiguity. There's no guarantee that a 90-day study will produce clear answers. Some mysteries are destined to remain unsolved.

On hearing of the new inquiry, Trump, unsurprisingly, saw a very different lesson, but characteristically, it was both self-referential and wrong: "Now everybody is agreeing that I was right."

Doyle McManus is a columnist for the Los Angeles Times. Readers may send him email at doyle.mcmanus@latimes.com.

# Texas proves that lack of masks doesn't spell doom

By Cynthia M. Allen

FORT WORTH, Texas — My parents, visiting from the East Coast, were surprised (but not so disappointed) to arrive in Texas and find so many people not wearing masks and so few businesses requiring them.

They were less surprised to learn that despite nearly three months of living without state-mandated pandemic restrictions, the COVID-19 caseload is still receding. Texas never experienced the massive spike in infections and deaths that Dr. Anthony Fauci predicted and that President Joe Biden insisted would be the cost of such "Neanderthal thinking."

Indeed, Texas reported zero COVID deaths on May 16, and on Thursday, the lowest number of hospitalizations from the virus since the first week of June 2020, quite a victory for a state that's home to some 30 million people.

(According to the latest data from

The New York Times, Pennsylvania, my parents' home, reported 66 deaths on May 16. And the state's mask mandate is still in place.)

Maybe Abbott was lucky.

Or, given what we are learning about COVID mandates' inconsistent outcomes, maybe he was right. Whatever the case, he deserves an apology.

It might be edifying to have the president and the nation's pre-eminent infectious disease expert admit not just that Texas' successful reopening was "confusing," as Fauci begrudgingly allowed, but that their verbal assaults on its governor's decision proved to be totally wrong. But the lost opportunity to say "I told you so" isn't the great cost here.

The real loss is in public trust of institutions and leaders, beginning with the public health establishment.

In fairness, public trust began eroding long before national leaders

began pillorying Texas for allowing its residents to decide for themselves when and if to go maskless.

From the earliest days of the pandemic, health and political officials (because sometimes the two converge) have squandered public confidence by giving them incomplete and sometimes completely inaccurate information.

No one should forget how, early on, Fauci and other health experts, spent weeks telling us that masks were useless, not because that's what they believed, but because they wanted to be sure there were enough available for medical personnel.

Months later, when masks were plentiful, Fauci began recommending "double masking" and scolding those who remained skeptical of their efficacy. I can't imagine why they would be.

More recently, Centers for Disease Control Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky, testifying before the Senate,

emotionally defended her agency's guidance for summer camps (which includes almost universal outdoor masking) using a wildly inaccurate description of the frequency with which COVID is spread outdoors. She referred to a single study that said "less than 10 percent" of transmissions occurred outdoors.

One of the study's authors quickly clarified that the likelihood of outdoor transmission is "still substantially less than 1 percent." Yet with the school year about to end, the CDC's camp guidance still requires masks for unvaccinated campers, most of whom aren't even eligible for the shots.

And while the origins of COVID remain unknown, detailed reporting that suggested a possible lab mistake in China was for months ignored or besmirched as racist and absurd by public health officials (among others). The only apparent reasons is that the origin story was associated with Donald Trump, who

admittedly isn't the soul of credibility.

But a renewed interest in the lab leak theory is finally so prominent (and distanced enough from the Trump era) that Biden has ordered his administration to further investigate.

In fairness, every public-policy maker during the pandemic deserves a modicum of grace, especially for decisions made early on when so much was unknown.

But at this stage, our leaders know a lot about what will serve the public good and what further erodes the public trust.

Admitting when they have erred or miscalculated would help to start rebuilding that trust.

Apologizing to Abbott would be a good place to start.

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