

EDITORIAL

DEQ's unfair accusation

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality ought to apologize to Baker County. And to Commission Chairman Bill Harvey in particular.

The state agency has admitted that it can't justify its accusation that the county — and Harvey, who did much of the work in question — removed flooring that contains asbestos, a known carcinogen that can be legally removed only by a licensed contractor, from a building the county bought in August 2020.

In a civil penalty document dated March 31, 2021, the DEQ claimed the county had committed two violations and should pay a fine of \$8,400.

Harvey said in May that the flooring he removed from the building at 2200 Fourth St., which houses the Baker County Health Department, did not contain asbestos. DEQ no longer is claiming that it did.

On Wednesday, July 14, the county commissioners approved a settlement with the DEQ in which the agency “withdraws” two of the three violations — the ones for which the \$8,400 fine would have been assessed.

The third violation — that the county did work on the building without having an asbestos survey done — continues, but it doesn't carry a fine.

According to a DEQ official, the agency's error stems from its assumption that because some samples of flooring from the Health Department building contain asbestos, the flooring Harvey removed did as well. Yet Harvey, who is a building contractor, said he knew that wasn't the case because the flooring he removed was relatively new, made after asbestos was no longer used as frequently in building materials (some new materials still contain asbestos).

A DEQ official said samples of flooring that appear identical to what Harvey removed were tested this spring and are asbestos-free; the official said the agency has no evidence that any of the flooring Harvey took out was tested, however. But that's quibbling — the available evidence is compelling that Harvey was right, and the DEQ wrong.

Harvey contends that DEQ officials should have investigated more thoroughly before issuing the now-rescinded penalty.

That's a reasonable expectation.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



COVID still lurks, but the Tokyo Olympics can go on, and safely

By Joel M. Zinberg

COVID-19 cases are rising, vaccinations are low, and most of the host country wants to cancel the event. Yet, the Games should go on.

The 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics were delayed until July 23, 2021, due to the pandemic. The rescheduled Games face continued headwinds.

More than 80 percent of Japanese, fearing a super-spreader event, want the Olympics canceled. Only 15 percent of the population is fully vaccinated. The country had a surge in cases during May that subsided, but small upticks in new cases in the Tokyo area — approximately 900 new cases per day in a city of 10 million — have prompted Japanese authorities to declare a state of emergency.

Japan had earlier barred foreign spectators from attending the Games and limited attendance to no more than 50 percent capacity by domestic spectators. More than 3.5 million Japanese fans bought tickets. Now the government, in concert with Olympic officials, announced that no spectators will be allowed into any Tokyo athletic venue. The total ban means that organizers will lose \$800 million in ticket sales. So far, the billions in TV revenues are safe but would be imperiled if the whole event is canceled.

More than just money is at stake, though. Over the years, the Olympics have been an important symbol of peaceful international competition and cooperation. Holding the Olympics is an opportunity to demonstrate that the pandemic is largely behind us and that life can safely return to normal. There are plenty of reasons to believe it can be done.

The NBA “bubble” — where the basketball league sequestered players and officials at Disney's Orlando resorts for three months last year to play the final games of the season and the playoffs — showed that sporting events could be safely conducted in an era before vaccines were available. Mitigation measures included daily testing, social distancing, mask-wearing and contact tracing. No COVID-19 cases were reported in the bubble.

Similar mitigation measures will be in effect in Tokyo. In addition, in contrast to the NBA bubble, most of the Olympic athletes have been vaccinated, which substantially lowers the possibility of viral transmission in the Olympic Village.

Japan's earlier strategy of allowing limited domestic attendance would likely be safe. NFL and NCAA games held with limited attendance this past football season did not increase the spread of COVID-19. Completely banning specta-

tors is likely overkill, but it guarantees there will be no disease transmission.

While Japanese vaccination efforts have lagged those of other developed nations, the pace of vaccinations has recently surged. Japanese authorities initiated a drive to vaccinate the country's 36 million people over age 65 by August. This is the age group that is far and away the most vulnerable to severe COVID-19 disease and death, accounting for more than 80 percent of COVID-19 deaths. COVID-19 represents a far less dangerous threat to younger people, especially if they do not have complicating medical co-morbidities. Vaccinating the elderly and convincing people with medical conditions to steer clear of public events will, independent of mitigation measures in place at the Olympics, curb COVID-19 infections and complications.

A year and half of sacrifice and medical and economic hardship, it is time to look forward. The Tokyo Olympics can be safely conducted and will be an important symbol of human resilience.

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The artificial salve to our malevolent weather

I adore air conditioning. It's the apex of human ingenuity, as far as I'm concerned.

Sure, we went to the moon. But if you build a big enough rocket — and once the basic premise was perfected, scaling up was more a matter of clever engineering than of inventive genius — you can go almost anywhere.

Especially when the American taxpayers are supplying the check-book.

Besides which, just a dozen men actually walked on the lunar surface.

That yielded a bunch of pretty pictures and videos, and spawned a few decent books and films. But the space program, which never got me so much as a foot off the ground, also doesn't chill my sweaty brow when I come inside after mowing the lawn on a torrid July day, my hair feeling as though I had just dunked it in a wading pool.

A tepid wading pool.

By contrast, almost every American, regardless of their level of interest in extraplanetary matters, benefits from air conditioning.

Even people who can't artificially cool their homes get a temporary reprieve from the heat when they go to a grocery store or visit the library or even duck into the post office for a roll of stamps.



JAYSON JACOBY

(I presume people still purchase rolls of stamps even in an era when so much of our communication relies on bytes rather than on paper, although I might be confounded by nostalgia.)

Despite the deep well of affinity I have long had for air conditioning, I don't know that I've ever appreciated the technology more than I have over the past few weeks.

We have hot spells around here every summer, of course. And even a run of a few 95-degree days will heighten my affection for our two window units — one of them a modern type with most of its visible pieces rendered in plastic to cut the weight, the other a nearly ancient box, almost entirely metal, which my vertebrae insist weighs as much as a V8 engine block.

(Every spring, come the first balmy afternoon that brings a stifling preview of August to our house, I will make some half-hearted comment that includes the phrase “central air.” But the project probably is beyond our means, and nothing ever comes from it except

that I start wondering where I put the plexiglas sheets that go up in the windows above our more modest — modest except in heft, in one case — portable units.)

What we don't get — or anyway didn't, until 2021 — is a 20-day heat wave that starts in late June.

And that tally is surely obsolete by the time you read this.

I'm writing on the 15th of July, which was the 19th day in the previous 20 when the temperature went over 90 at the Baker City Airport.

And on the one day it didn't, the thermometer registered a peak of 89. This is a difference only a thermometer, which knows nothing of the unpleasantness of peeling off a sweat-soaked wool sock that adheres to skin with the doggedness of a barnacle, can distinguish.

But what's truly malevolent about our recent weather — and I feel it appropriate to use “our” in this case, since we're all subject, to varying degrees, to its treachery — is not its duration, horrible though that is.

It's the timing.

I don't much care for a string of torrid days at any point. But when the temperature soars to levels more associated with baked goods, and we're better than halfway to the equinox, I can at least bask in

the solace that the atmosphere will soon enough move onto other sorts of mischief, such as the tomato-killing September freeze or the pre-Halloween blizzard.

But July is barely on the wane and already my mouth feels perpetually parched, and by early afternoon my contact lenses perch atop my corneas like grits of sand.

(Unless my eyes are leaking, what with the cloying wildfire smoke. I enjoy the tang of a campfire of seasoned lodgepole. But not in my kitchen.)

The prospects are troubling.

Even if the rest of the summer reverts to normal — well, a normal late summer hereabouts entails a fair number of hot days.

By Labor Day I expect I'll be awfully tired of the air conditioners' constant clatter, no matter the relief that comes along with the decibels.

I had a pleasant reminder last weekend, though, that even when a dome of high pressure has descended on the Intermountain West like some vengeful force, it is possible, however briefly, to find a respite without the use of chemical refrigerants.

We went camping along the Middle Fork of the John Day, a few miles downriver from Bates.

It was hot in the afternoons

while we there, even in the shade of the ponderosa pines, even while wading in the cool Middle Fork.

But at night, thanks to the principles of fluid dynamics — something perhaps almost as magical as air conditioning — the cooling air, owing to its greater density, settled into the valley and pooled there, like a frosty beer pouring into the bottom of a mug.

I awoke once in the inimitable dark of the woods, realized I was a trifle chilly and pulled the down sleeping bag snugly around my torso.

When I came awake next, in the thin light of dawn, I shambled the few steps to the counter of our trailer — it's a popup, so a few steps is the most you can take in one journey — and picked up the little portable thermometer that I consider a mandatory item.

Its LCD numbers read 43.6.

I pondered this not minor miracle for probably several seconds.

Then I went out and kindled a fire.

And basked in the simple pleasure of waiting for the orange flames to warm fingers slightly stiff and numb in the coldest minutes of the day.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.