

Opinion

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OUR VIEW

Protecting rivers that go dry?

It was a bit surprising to discover that some of the rivers proposed for Wild and Scenic designation were dried up or creeks, streams or gulches — not really rivers at all.

Missteps like that go to the heart of criticisms of sweeping legislation that paints a broad brush, but fails to look at the finer details.

A Senate bill that would designate nearly 4,700 miles as part of The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System in Oregon is being criticized for including hundreds of small creeks, streams and gulches that were found to be completely dry, according to the Capital Press and its reporter, George Plaven.

The American Forest Resources Council, a trade group representing the timber industry, did an analysis of the proposal, arguing that certain non-river segments under consideration “do not meet the intent or definition of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.”

Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, both Democrats, introduced the River Democracy Act on Feb. 3. A year prior to that, there was a well-attended open house here in Bend, where many submitted comments on which rivers should be protected from development along their banks. The legislation came out of more than 15,000 nominations submitted by the public.

But according to the forest group, just 15% of the waterways are actually labeled as “rivers.” Out of 886 segments, 752 are identified as “streams,” rather than rivers. Another 33 are identified as “gulches,” one “draw” and 17 were “unnamed tributaries.”

The bill would roughly triple the number of wild and scenic rivers across Oregon to protect fish and wildlife, water quality and outdoor recreation values. It also increases wild and scenic river corridors from a quarter-mile to a half-mile on both sides, which adds up to approximately 3 million acres of protected land — an area approximately the size of Connecticut.

Cutting timber along streambanks is a well-known cause of sediment in rivers and a degradation of fish and wildlife habitat. But, the forest council’s president, Travis Joseph, makes a good point that restricting the ability to harvest trees when the state is in a grip of catastrophic wildfires and where thinning of trees can reduce the wildfire risk is detrimental to the bill’s intent.

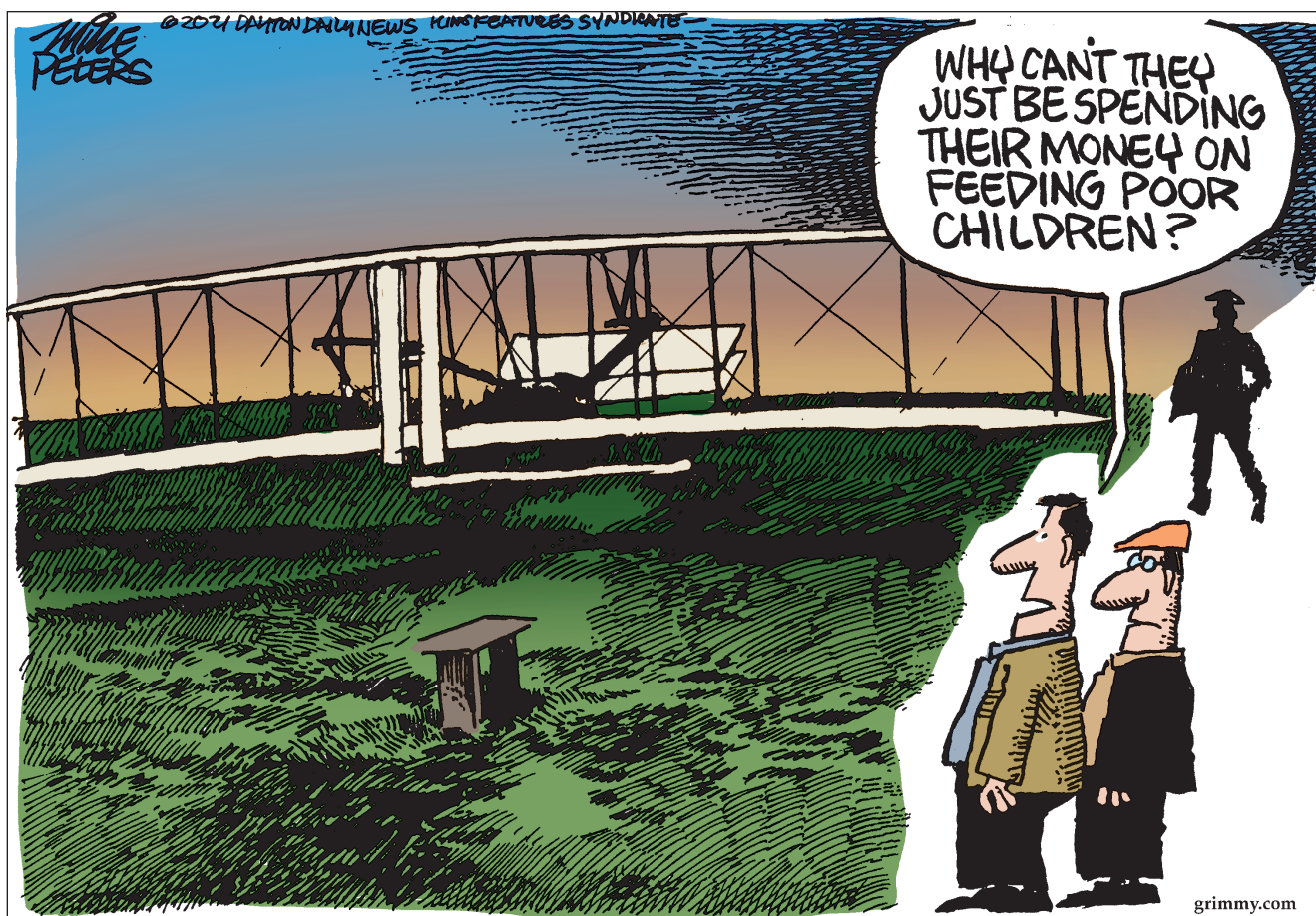
Sen. Wyden says those claims are addressed in the bill, calling for coordination between state and federal agencies to allow for forest thinning.

But there needs to be some balance here. We can see the Willamette, Deschutes and Santiam rivers gaining some protection against development as they are truly wild and scenic rivers. Even the headwaters of these rivers deserve attention. But intermittent streams are not really rivers and should not be considered as such. We encourage some clarity on the issues, especially how state and federal agencies would be held accountable for working together. And perhaps removing some of the nonflowing streams from the list of this important designation would go a long way to boosting its credibility as a new piece of legislation.

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Letters to the editor

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We need to be bold idealists

By David L. Nevins

Tuesday night, July 22, as I listened to Jeff Bezos speak of his vision for space, I was moved by the vastness of his vision; his vision of space as a production center to lessen the environmental dangers of industrial production to our planet.

His vision seems so far-fetched today, just as I am sure a vision of a vast commercial aviation business that flies millions of people around the world daily would have seemed only a distant dream after Wilbur and Orville Wright’s first flight of 12 seconds and 120 feet in 1903.

I was inspired by Bezos’ vision as it applies to the work I have been doing for over a decade to repair the broken democracy that currently exists in our nation. As the founder and chairman of the board of the Bridge Alliance, a coalition of 90-plus organizations working together to strengthen our democracy and heal the divides that separate us as a society, I sometimes feel that my efforts and those of my colleagues are merely an idealistic dream given that the toxic polarization and dysfunction seem to be getting worse, not better.

And so Bezos’ words inspired me. His statement that big things start small reminds me that the task of democracy reformers will not be easy. As things seem to be getting worse, I realize that now is the time to take bold steps. While polls show most Americans believe our democracy is highly dysfunctional, many say to me the chances of change are small given the enormity of the task at hand. I fully understand the challenges that lie ahead, but like the exploration of space, taking small steps

now will build into giant leaps in the future. Just as Bezos realizes his dream will not be realized in his lifetime, I realize the same may be true for the work democracy reformers are doing.

As with most innovations, big changes are never the work of one person. Innovation comes from the combined energy and brilliance of a community of people all working toward the same goal. Like the transcontinental railroad or the great interstate highway system that has brought our citizens closer together in terms of proximity, we are building a similar infrastructure, an infrastructure for democracy.

The visionary leaders of the organizations within the Bridge Alliance recognize that democracy must be founded on discourse and discussion, and that these discussions must be replete with differing perspectives and opinions. This visionary group of men and women, with whom I work daily, understand that embracing our ideological differences will ultimately lead to inquiry, and this inquiry to truth. Civil discourse and critical thought are essential if the grand experiment that is American democracy is to succeed.

This week, Bezos decided not only to invest in space, but in the infrastructure of democracy as well. Two “Courage and Civility” awards valued at \$100 million apiece went to José Andres, whose World Central Kitchen helps feed masses of people following natural disasters, and Van Jones, who has founded several efforts to bridge the divide that separates us.

In announcing the awards, Bezos said: “We need unifiers and not vilifiers. ... We need people who argue hard and

act hard for what they believe. But they do that always with civility and never ad hominem attacks. Unfortunately, we live in a world where this is too often not the case. But we do have role models.”

Now is the time to realize that bold changes are needed. The recipes of the past simply do not work. As idealistic as it seems today, flight exploration is going to change the very nature of commerce, so the work of the Bridge Alliance and our members seems equally as preposterous.

Let us be bold idealists, with big dreams:

A democracy where elected representatives are direct and honest in their public statements, putting ethical commitments above partisan and career objectives, surely seems impossible in today’s environment.

A democracy where elected representatives who engage constructively, and do not dehumanize each other and refuse to debate the issues of our time in good faith, seems so far away if not impossible.

A democracy that represents the diversity that is America, a democracy that represents the voice of young people, people of all ethnic and racial backgrounds, rural and urban dwellers, conservatives and progressives, is within our grasp if We the People invest today in this dream for a better future.

We need to be bold and now is the time!

David L. Nevins is co-publisher of The Fulcrum and co-founder and board chairman of the Bridge Alliance Education Fund.

OTHER VIEWS

Editorial from The San Diego Union-Tribune:

While still well below their winter peaks, the latest spikes in new COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are raising concerns among health officials and among many Americans — just not among enough, given how many people still remain unvaccinated.

New coronavirus cases have more than doubled in the past month in San Diego County and in California, fueled by the highly infectious delta variant that now makes up 83% of new U.S. cases. The surge is even stronger in Los Angeles County, leading authorities to reimpose indoor mask mandates.

Even now, 16 months into this public health crisis, there remains much we don’t know about the novel coronavirus and COVID-19, the disease it causes. But it’s very clear that the vaccines work very well and that more Americans should have shots by now and more should get them as soon as possible.

As Michelle Goldberg noted in her column in The New York Times last week, the irony is that the social distancing required to control COVID-19 “nurtured pathologies that are now prolonging it,” and isolated people “turned to movements that turned them against vaccines.”

Thankfully, some pundits and Republican politicians whose forceful advocacy might have helped prevent a new surge are joining the fight this week.

Fox host Sean Hannity, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and House GOP Whip Steve Scalise of Louisiana offered their loudest, most unambiguous endorsements of getting vaccinated yet. With the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reporting that more than 97% of COVID-19 hospitalizations nationwide are occurring among the unvaccinated, the value of vaccinations has never been clearer. The stunning drop in U.S. life expectancy in 2020, announced on Wednesday, July 21 only adds to the case. “If there is anybody out there willing to listen: Get vaccinated,” McConnell said. “This is not complicated.”

Goaded on by Fox News’ Tucker Carlson and social media disinformation merchants, many supporters of Donald Trump have depicted their refusal to get vaccines as an affirmation of both their individual freedom and their contempt for the mainstream media and public health officials. They have done so even though Trump himself was vaccinated long ago, and new reporting has suggested that aggressive, innovative medical treatment saved him from death last October when he contracted COVID-19 after a manic half-century of defying mask edicts at the White House and during rallies.

Local statistics — with 98.7% of new infections and 99.7% of hospitalizations among those who are not fully vaccinated — offer even greater reassurances. But there remains trepidation and debate

about how to reopen schools amid California’s indoor mask mandate for K-12 campuses. Local superintendents have criticized it and the CDC shares the view that fully vaccinated students shouldn’t have mask requirements.

Nationally renowned scientist Eric Topol told the San Diego News Fix podcast that he is wearing a mask again indoors because of the delta variant surge. He called wearing a mask, especially when inside for a protracted period of time, “the best thing you can do indoors.” Mask-wearing shouldn’t be mandated, Topol said, to avoid rebellions. But common sense dictates wearing one — “just out of intelligence and the science that backs it up.”

The decision on whether to reopen the U.S.-Mexico land border is more complex. Citing the delta variant surge, U.S. officials announced Wednesday the federal government will keep restrictions on non-essential travel across the border through at least Aug. 21. Given reports showing Baja California and San Diego County have similar, relatively high vaccination rates, the Biden administration should set specific benchmarks for when restrictions can be eased. Complete pandemic safety is not possible. Considerable safety is. With COVID-19 deaths a fraction of what they used to be, pandemic policies must be calibrated to reduce the collateral damage they create, in schools, on the border, everywhere.