

EDITORIAL

Fast work foils a scary fire

It was a very bad place for a wildfire.

Granted, in this summer of drought and record-breaking heat, there is no good place for a wildfire to start in Northeastern Oregon.

But the upper part of the Rock Creek canyon, in the Elkhorn Mountains about 13 miles northwest of Baker City, is a decidedly dangerous spot for a blaze.

Aerial photos illustrate the threat, showing the nearly contiguous carpet of conifer trees. Worse still, many of these trees are subalpine firs, a species that burns with unusual vigor due in part to the concentrations of flammable oil in its needles.

Then there is the issue of access for firefighters.

Mainly, there isn't any. Not the rapid access afforded by roads, anyway. There isn't a road within a mile of the Rock Creek fire, which was reported Monday afternoon, Aug. 30.

The fire was moving fast. Flames were engulfing entire trees — “torching” — and spreading from crown to crown. A cold front was moving through, spurring wind gusts that worsened the situation.

Then the aircraft arrived.

In the several crucial hours Monday afternoon and evening — when not a single firefighter was on the ground in the area; fire officials said it was too dangerous to have crews rappel from a helicopter — a fleet of five tankers dropping retardant and two helicopters dumping water kept the fire in check. There's no way to be sure, of course — wildfire is nothing if not unpredictable — but it's reasonable to believe that without that rapid and aggressive aerial campaign, the fire would still be spreading today.

With massive blazes burning elsewhere in Oregon, California, Idaho and other western states, it's fortunate that the aircraft were available so rapidly.

We don't want to have rely on good fortune.

Not with tens of thousands of acres, in the Elkhorns and across the region, vulnerable to fire until the first widespread autumn rainstorm.

Lightning is still possible, but it's much less likely now than during August. The Forest Service initially deemed the Rock Creek fire human-caused but later changed it to “unknown” pending an investigation. Regardless, campfires are banned except in campgrounds and designated recreation areas. All of us who use public forests should heed that and other precautions. This has been a comparatively quiet fire season around here. Let's all strive to make sure it ends up that way.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor

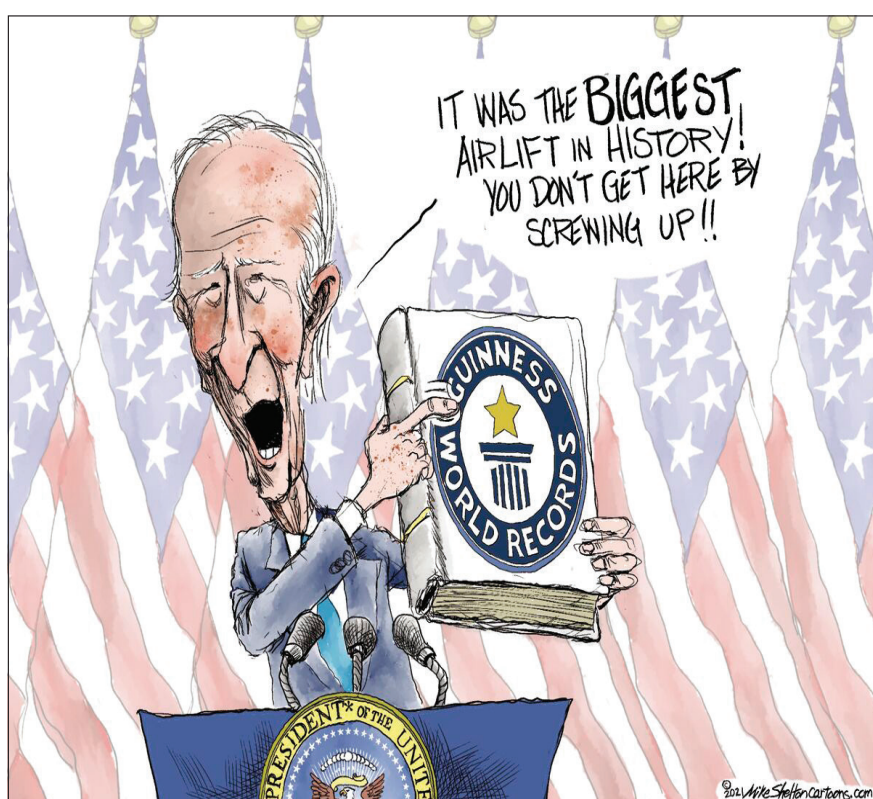
Your views

Vaccine myths call into question science education

It seems to me that the quality of education in the field of science has become wholly inadequate in this country. Are we not aware that science is not an alternative belief system? That it is based on empirically derived hypotheses obtained through long study of the data based on experiment and observation, rather than theory or personal beliefs. Again, scientific data is NOT the same as deeply held personal beliefs.

People who know anything about vaccinations and know of the long history of working on vaccines for viruses ever since the 1918 great pandemic flu, and know that vaccines were NOT produced “too quickly” to be safe. They will know the difference between DNA and mRNA and how these viruses work at replicating themselves. People who know about viruses would not be ingesting a horse parasitic medication to fight the virus. People who know about metals and magnetism are not going to be claiming that the COVID vaccine “magnetized” them. It is not necessary for all students to want to be scientists when they graduate and go on to study at a higher level, but at the very least we should be providing in our school system a solid foundation of science to know enough about how it works and then can make informed decisions based on facts ... NOT personal beliefs.

Christine Howard
Baker City



City Council needs to consider responsibility as well as rights

The City Council's idea of a lawsuit against Governor Brown's mandates in her effort to stem the spread of a deadly virus is very disturbing. If it is done for political purposes, it is inexcusable, aside from also being a misuse of taxpayers' money, both the City's cost to file and the State's to defend. If done out of ignorance, it shows that the councilors are in urgent need of a science-based (not Facebook-based) crash course in epidemiology and viral mutation. One currently hears a lot about

“individual rights,” but very rarely about “individual responsibility,” the latter supposed to be an integral part of and basis for the former.

The vaccines have been proven safe and very effective, and masks are primarily to keep those who do get infected from spreading the virus to others. Is there any thought about those who will get sick or maybe even die because they follow the councilors' lead? Or those who work to exhaustion and at personal risk to take care of them?

Kirsten Badger
Baker City

Vaccine better than horse dewormer

Editorial from St. Louis Post-Dispatch:

For months after the coronavirus vaccines were released, many Americans who refused to take them cited the fact that they were initially approved by federal regulators on an emergency fast-track basis rather than under the normal drug-approval process. That fear, never fully valid to begin with, should have finally been laid to rest by the recent full, formal approval of the first of the vaccines.

Yet even now, significant numbers of vaccine-skeptical people are instead turning to a drug meant to deworm horses, which has repeatedly failed to protect against the coronavirus in clinical trials and in some cases has proven dangerous. This should stand as further evidence (if any was still needed) that the anti-vaccination movement lacks any credibility whatsoever and should have no sway over public policy.

Ivermectin has been effectively used in small doses in humans to treat parasites, but human trials haven't produced evidence it's effective on

the coronavirus. That hasn't stopped people from buying up the human version to the point that pharmacies are running out. Worse, some are turning to veterinary supply sources for the livestock version — which is not merely ineffective against the coronavirus but dangerous. Ivermectin-related calls to poison control centers have risen fivefold in recent months.

It's reminiscent of the controversy over hydroxychloroquine, a malaria medication that, like ivermectin, has shown scant actual evidence of effectiveness against the coronavirus and has potentially dangerous side effects. But with backing and misinformation from right-wing media and some Republican politicians (including, in the case of hydroxychloroquine, former President Donald Trump), too many Americans are viewing these unproven, unlikely remedies as silver bullets, while continuing to reject vaccines that have been proven for months to be both highly effective and safe.

It's not putting it too strongly to suggest that this is madness. What social, political or psychological factors

would cause large numbers of otherwise rational Americans to reject vaccines that have earned provisional and now formal approval by the Food and Drug Administration, while embracing drugs that the FDA and other experts warn are ineffective and dangerous? It's almost as if, having staked out the bizarre position that vaccine acceptance is a violation of conservatism, those adherents are suddenly recognizing that the crisis is real and lunging for whatever vaccine alternative they can find.

Declaring an entire segment of society to be so outside the pale that their voices should be deliberately ignored isn't something that should be done lightly — but on the issue of these snake-oil alternatives, the time has come. Vaccine mandates, vaccine passports and other proposed policies are centered on the simple scientific fact that vaccines work. Like all public policies, these ideas must be open to debate. But there should be no seat at that table for those who pass up medically approved vaccines in favor of a horse dewormer.

Remembering the man who tried to save my brain

I read “obituary” in the email and as always when I come across that lonely word, unattached to any name, I winced slightly, as if anticipating a possible blow.

With trepidation, I clicked to open the message.

I wondered, in that instant while the computer worked its digital magic, whose name I would see — whether it was a person I had known, whether I would be shocked to learn of the death.

It was.

And I was.

The name was David Coughlin.

Dave was such a vital man — a man whose hands and feet were the first to touch some of the most precipitous mountain faces in Northeastern Oregon — that it had never occurred to me to think that he might die at the modest age of 77.

I think I was surprised too — and, of course, saddened — because Dave and his wife, Lisa, had so recently started anew.

After living in Baker City for almost 50 years, the couple moved in March of this year to Bend, where their daughter, Jennifer, and grandson, Jackson, live.



JAYSON JACOBY

The Coughlins sent me a letter that month, one they wanted published in the Herald. They announced in the letter that they were moving. They thanked the community “for all your kindness and friendships over the years” and they wrote that they hoped “we have contributed as much to the community as it has given to us.”

I have no doubt that they did.

Lisa taught at Baker High School.

Dave was an attorney here for 46 years. He was an integral member of the Baker County Community Literacy Coalition, and a board member for many years.

I had a brief phone conversation with Dave at the time. I told him I thought it was a fine gesture, writing that letter. I told him I hoped he and Lisa would enjoy spending more time with their daughter and their grandson.

I'm sorry for them all that their time together was so short.

I spent an hour or so in Dave's office in 2017, interviewing him for a profile story on his retirement.

It was the sort of interview that makes this job scarcely seem like work.

Dave told me about his mountain climbing exploits, a topic that I find endlessly fascinating. I did not until that day know that he had played football at Dartmouth. He told me that when he first saw the Elkhorn Mountains he knew, in the way that people sometimes do, that he was destined to live here, in the lee of those great peaks. I understood what he meant.

But the memory that will, I suspect, always be the most vivid, when I think of Dave Coughlin, was quite a different encounter.

And it was one that Dave himself didn't even know about — which is to say, he didn't know it was me — until I told him some time after.

It was many years ago, perhaps as long as a decade although I can't be sure, so slippery is time. I was riding my bike on Highway 7, just south of town and headed toward

Sumpter (not that I intended to ride so far; my destination was Salisbury Junction). I was rounding the corner where the highway enters Bowen Valley when I saw the figure standing on Beaver Creek Loop, the gravel road that meets the highway there. He was standing beside his car, gesticulating.

I couldn't at first make out what he was getting at.

But as I pedaled closer I understood. I also recognized Dave. He was pointing to his head, but his goal was to make me think about my own.

Which was not, I realized suddenly, protected by a helmet.

A champion triathlete who undoubtedly has covered more miles on two wheels than I ever will do, in addition to his achievements in the mountains, Dave certainly understood the importance of a helmet.

As I rolled past I gave Dave a thumb's up, my face crinkled into what I hoped was the appropriately sheepish grin of a person who knows he's been caught out in public doing something conspicuously stupid.

Sometime later, probably a couple days but certainly not so much as a week, I phoned Dave to make sure he knew who the foolish rider was. I thanked him for reminding me that brains generally do not fare well in collisions with asphalt, particularly from the elevated perch, and speed, of a bicycle.

Mostly I wanted to be sure he didn't regret his action, didn't wonder whether he had been presumptuous in trying to persuade someone to protect the only brain he's ever going to have.

Even now, years later, I still think of Dave every time I strap on my helmet, which I do even when I'm going for a short ride in town with my kids.

I figured someday I would have a chance to tell him that story again, to remind him that he had inspired me to stop acting like an idiot in at least one way.

A tiny part of Dave's legacy, to be sure.

But it meant something to me. Still does.

Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.