

EDITORIAL

Worries about the River Act

Oregon's U.S. senators, Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, cleverly included the word "Democracy" in their bill, introduced a year ago and pending in Congress, that would nearly triple the mileage of waterways in the state under the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers system.

That august word, so beloved in America, tends to burnish whatever it's applied to.

But although the senators used the democratic tactic of soliciting suggestions from the public about which streams to include in their River Democracy Act, that's not the most appropriate method when it comes to potentially imposing federal protection, and the associated potential restrictions, on an estimated 3 million acres (based on the proposed mile-wide corridor along the included streams). That includes about 104,000 acres in Baker County along segments of 31 waterways.

Critics, including the Baker County Board of Commissioners, who on Wednesday, Feb. 2, unanimously approved a resolution opposing the bill, point out that some streams scarcely qualify as such since they might not carry water year round.

The 1968 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is intended to protect rivers that have "outstanding natural, cultural and recreational values in a free-flowing condition."

"Flowing" obviously requires water.

And although another key word in the 1968 Act — "outstanding" — is decidedly subjective, the senators should use more informed criteria in crafting their bill than the preferences of a minuscule percentage of the state's population. Wyden and Merkley said they received nominations from about 2,500 Oregonians.

Protecting streams is a worthwhile goal, to be sure.

And designating streams under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act does not restrict activities on adjacent public land (private land isn't affected) nearly as stringently as another federal law, the Wilderness Act.

Yet the bill would prohibit new mining permits on public land in the corridors along designated streams (existing permits would be grandfathered in, according to Wyden's spokesman, Hank Stern).

The bill also could thwart efforts to thin overcrowded forests. That's a problem rife in the Blue Mountains and one that increases the risk of catastrophic wildfires which would sully any values, outstanding or otherwise, that a stream has.

Wyden points out that the River Democracy Act would not prohibit logging in stream corridors to reduce the risk of wildfires. He also notes that reducing fire risk, with a focus on using prescribed fire to curb fuel loads, is among his chief goals for public lands. The bill also would require agencies that manage designated corridors — primarily the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management — to assess wildfire risks in each corridor.

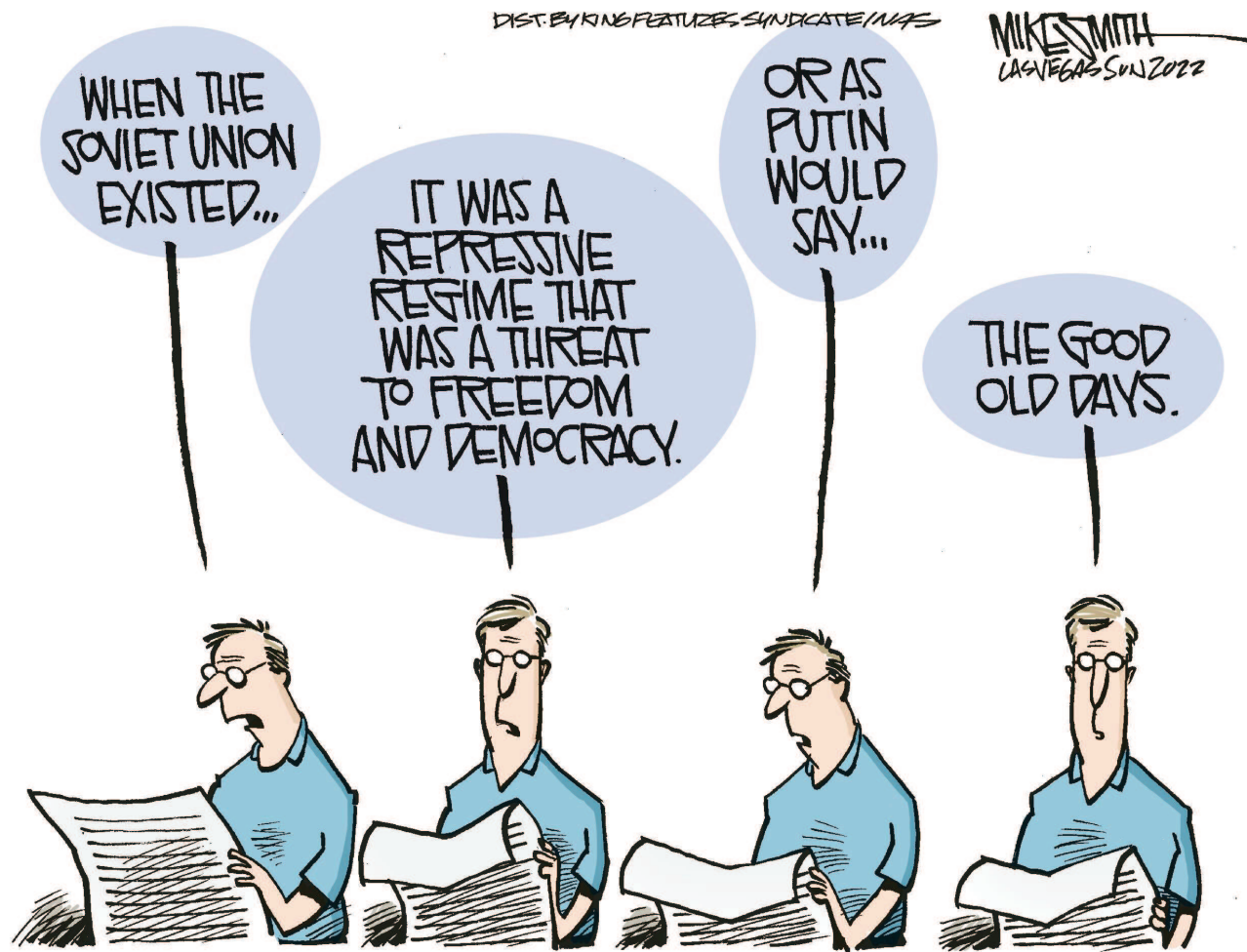
That all sounds promising.

But it's hardly farfetched to fret that a wild and scenic river designation would embolden environmental groups to legally challenge reasonable thinning projects under the guise that such work would harm the corridor's "outstanding" values.

And prescribed fire, though a valuable tool whose use should be expanded on public land, in many places must be preceded by tree-cutting, lest the "managed" fire do more harm than good.

Ultimately, the River Democracy Act is a bit premature. Rather than giving federal protection to 4,700 miles of streams in one fell swoop, and then figuring out later not only how to manage them but whether they actually met the standards of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, Wyden and Merkley should call for a more thorough study of the nominated segments and present a refined list in future legislation.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor


OTHER VIEWS

Return to normal life will require vigilance

Bloomberg Opinion:

For the first time in a long while, there's good news about COVID-19. The omicron wave is cresting in the U.S., and in many states is already receding. A respite from SARS-CoV-2 could well follow. And if new variants eventually emerge, it may be possible to live with them — that is, without shutting businesses, always wearing masks and social distancing.

A return to normal — that modest but elusive goal — should be possible once COVID-19 hospitalizations fall from thousands each day much closer to the hundreds associated with a bad flu season. Ensuring it lasts will require careful monitoring, better data collection, and a nationwide effort to prevent another crisis.

Five things in particular need to be monitored:

1. Surges in COVID-19 cases and deaths anywhere in the world. Working with the World Health Organization, the U.S. should help other countries keep a close eye on COVID-19 outbreaks (as well as outbreaks of other contagious respiratory illnesses) and report data quickly and publicly, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does in the United States.
2. Genomic changes in the coronavi-

rus. To detect the arrival of new variants, the CDC must improve its efforts to analyze the genetic code of the virus found in people who test positive. The agency conducts such testing in certain areas, but it has yet to build out a sufficiently extensive and geographically representative system, leaving the U.S. dependent on other countries for news of emerging variants. All patients who experience severe breakthrough infections should have their viruses analyzed.

3. Vaccine effectiveness. Working with vaccine makers and independent scientists, the Food and Drug Administration and the CDC need to jointly monitor Americans for waning immunity, especially as new variants arise. All the existing vaccines are expected to lose some of their power with time. It's crucial to continually assess their effectiveness and have boosters available as needed.

4. COVID-19's presence in sewage. Measuring the level of coronavirus in public wastewater systems can provide an early warning of COVID-19 surges and likewise indicate when infections are waning. The CDC created the National Wastewater Surveillance System in 2020 to work with state and local health departments to test wastewater. In the process, it needs to strengthen standards for sewage testing and ensure

that measurements from various systems are comparable.

5. Hospital bed availability and staffing levels. Accurate and timely information from states on hospital capacity can also indicate when viral infections are surging. The CDC already compiles such data, but state-level statistics aren't always up to date or consistent. Refining this system can help ensure that the country's hospitals are prepared to handle an outbreak.

All this information should be uploaded to public databases. Also needed is a clear sense of how much COVID-19 Americans are willing to live with. Ezekiel Emanuel, of the University of Pennsylvania, suggests setting a risk threshold for COVID-19, flu and other viruses together of about 35,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths in a week. Beyond those levels — or similar benchmarks — elected officials could consider reimposing mask mandates and other restrictions to protect health care systems from overload.

Of course, COVID-19 alone caused about four times that many hospitalizations and five times that many deaths in late January. But the numbers are falling, and with luck the omicron wave will have receded by spring. It's time to look ahead with cautious optimism, and to put sensible measures in place to end the permanent crisis.

YOUR VIEWS
Republican Party seems to have an interesting strategy

I believe the Republican Party has an interesting election plan. It seems to accept no mask or vaccination requirements, yet sees so many unvaccinated being hospitalized or dying. Then, when election season rolls around and assuming the unvaccinated continue to get sick, how voters are to access the restricted voting booths and dropoffs seems a bit of a conundrum.

Amazing political strategy.

Thomas Nash
Halfway

In gratitude to the guys of Oregon and all they do

On a cold, gray, snowy day on the high plateau of Eastern Oregon, I went outside to mail a letter. My husband and our adopted son were working on our vehicle, my husband sitting in the vehicle pumping the brakes, our son in his well-worn Carhartts lying on the frigid ground under the car, bleeding the brakes. Returning to the heated indoors I felt a rush of gratitude to Oregonian guys for all they do to build and maintain vehicles, trailers, home, plumbing, driveways, workshops and so much more. My contributions — cooking in a warm kitchen, mending, laundry, shopping, administration, love and an attentive ear — are the least I can provide for these diligent, uncomplaining guys. Thank you, guys, on behalf of your family and community.

Lindianne Sarno
Baker City

Schools need to stand up and make masks a choice

Oregon leaders have put schools in difficult positions at the expense of our children. As an educator in Northeast Oregon I have watched my students and own children suffer as a result of mask mandates and social distancing rules for

two years. Students are demonstrating deficits in social/emotional skills, speech and language, and in academics. There are increased mental health concerns among both students and school staff. School boards are tasked with enforcing the mandates or risk losing funding. Administrators "threaten" students with the loss of extracurricular activities and more online school due to school closures if they don't comply. The teacher's union continues to conspire with Oregon leaders as they control public schools. All while masked students and staff continue to fall ill with COVID, the flu, and other normal illnesses that circulate through schools. Mask mandates and social distancing rules are costing us our future. It's time schools, staff, parents and students demand local control and that mask wearing becomes an individual choice.

Allie Scott
Union

Why I think Commissioner Nichols should apologize

Editor's note: This is the letter the author sent to Baker County Commissioners related to the Feb. 2 meeting.

In the Public Participation, Agenda Item 3, I engaged in voicing my opposition of Baker County government continued acquiescence in supporting the illegitimate Kate Brown masking rules. Case in point, the recently added (Jan. 2022) preamble to the monthly Commission Meeting Agenda Notice stating that everyone over the age of 5, must adhere to indoor masking when attending County government sponsored meetings. Be that as it may, that is not the subject I am addressing here.

During my public testimony, Commissioners Bennett, Harvey and I engaged in dialogue. All of us with a direct, strong held positions of disagreement, but respectful of each other's Right of Free Speech and expressing, passionately, those opinions, with possibly raised voices to emphasize our points.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, Nichols got up to ask for court security personnel to come to the Commission Chamber, evidently wanting to shut down the robust discussion we were having. Hard to tell what Nichols' reasoning was or is! Later when it was communicated to me, that action had occurred, and then during public discussion of the River Democracy Act (Wyden's land lockup bill), I again stood to compliment the Commissioners' unanimous opposition to the Rivers Act, and I confronted Nichols in asking if he specifically had called for the security detail. He sheepishly admitted that yes he had.

To say that I was shocked, appalled, offended and flabbergasted at such outrageous and scurrilous attempt to intimidate the free exchange of opposing positions, is most definitely an understatement! Neither of the other two commissioners, nor anyone else in the Chambers, felt ANY threat of any kind. It is still hard for me to imagine that this actually occurred. In my 30-plus years of active political engagement, federal, state, and local government level, I have never been so shamefully treated. All who know me would never imagine that I would ever harbor any thought of physically harming anyone. This was an attempt by Nichols to besmirch my character, no matter how he tries to squirm out of it. He was completely out of line, unbelievably classless!

I am expecting a full and public apology from Bruce Nichols, plus an affirmation of public participation in free and open discussions when conflicting opinions on issues arise, especially when public participation is encouraged. Isn't that the American patriotic way?

I would also offer that if Nichols is overwhelmed and alarmed with the passionate expression of free speech, that he should contemplate resigning as commissioner to a safer environment, free of conflicting opinions?

Curtis W. Martin
North Powder