

**EDITORIAL**

## Questions about the future of natural gas in Oregon

The Oregon Public Utility Commission is shaping the future of how you heat your home, heat your water and cook your food.

The big question: What should be the role of natural gas?

Under the state's climate protection program, perhaps not much. Oregon natural gas companies must collectively achieve emissions reductions of 50% by 2035 and 90% by 2050.

What do natural gas companies think about that plan? Not much. They sued the state over it.

The PUC's job is to regulate utilities in Oregon. It has to weigh the interests of consumers and also ensure utilities make enough money to provide reliable and safe service. It is looking at the state's climate protection program advanced by an executive order from Gov. Kate Brown. The PUC wants to know the impact on consumer bills. It's looking for ways to reduce that impact and accommodate the utilities. The commissioners, appointed by the governor, listened to hours of testimony on July 12, and there is a draft version of a state report.

The price of natural gas, well you likely guessed it, it's expected to go up. Cascade Natural Gas has estimated its prices for residential consumers are may climb by 43% by 2040, if the state's climate protection plan goes into effect as planned. By using hydrogen or synthetic or renewable natural gas, natural gas companies may be able to meet the state's emission goals. But some people are not sure that would work. In any case, if prices rise or because of a change in attitudes, consumers may shift away from natural gas. When it comes time to replace or install water heaters, ranges, or heating systems, consumers may go electric.

Wealthier consumers may just switch. Lower-income consumers may not. It could create a situation where fewer customers are supporting the natural gas system. Prices for those people will rise and some consumers may be left stranded with higher costs. Natural gas companies could be stranded with more infrastructure than they need.

PUC Commissioner Mark Thompson asked repeatedly July 12: What is right for consumers? Should the PUC prioritize decarbonization or controlling costs?

Some people want Oregon to clamp down on expanding natural gas service — no more natural gas line growth, no more gas appliances in new homes. Others say if Oregon does that, prices will spike and consumers will suffer. Oregon may have to suffer blackouts because the electrical grid is not prepared for a dramatic increase in load.

The natural gas utilities called on July 12 for more analysis. The current study by the PUC focuses narrowly on natural gas. Natural gas utilities want a decarbonization analysis that looks at both natural gas and electric utilities to see how it fits together. Otherwise, how could the state know what the least cost, least risk path forward is?

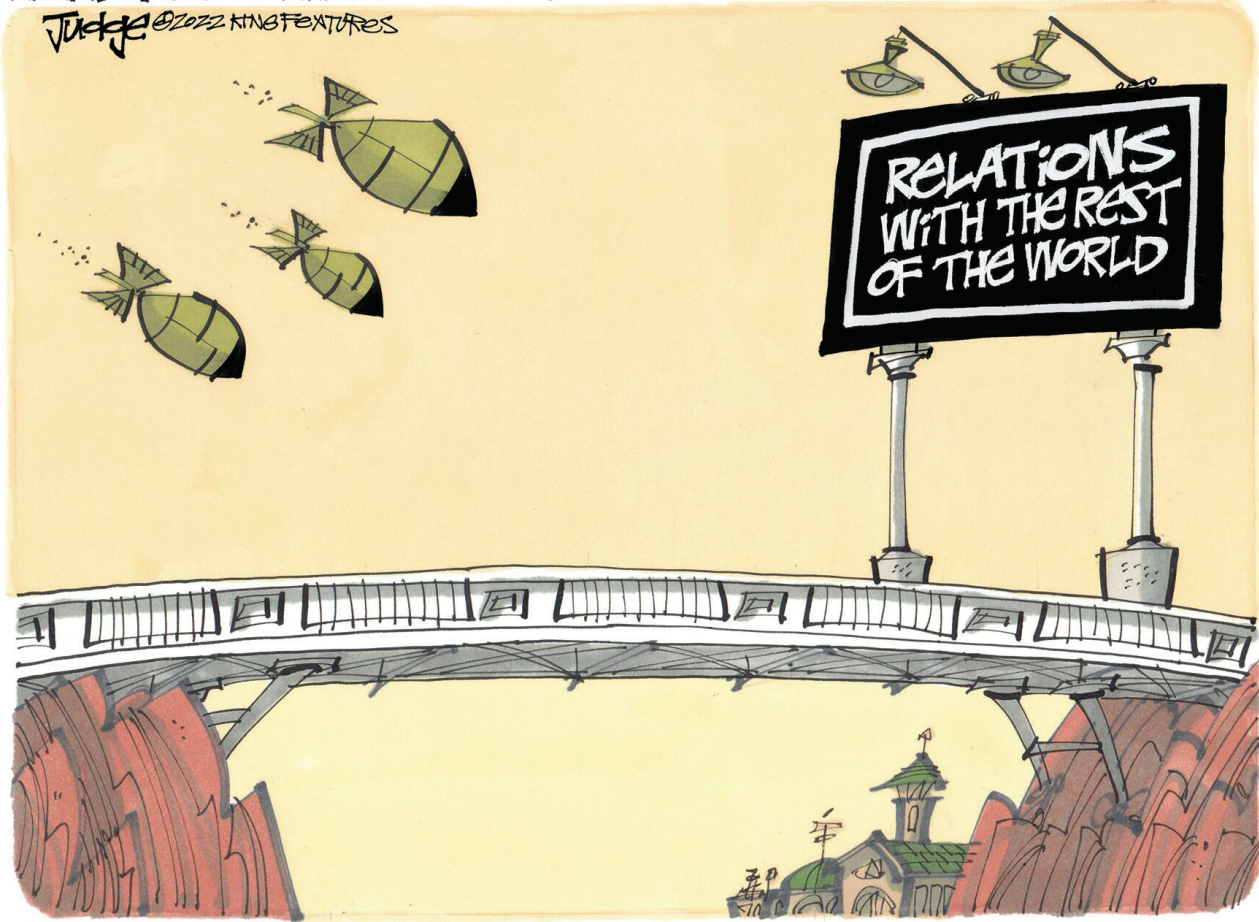
Bob Jenks is the executive director of the Citizens Utility Board. It's that group's role to be the voice of consumers in Oregon utility regulation. Jenks is dismayed that the PUC's draft report contained a fundamental assumption that natural gas service needs to expand in Oregon. He pointed out natural gas companies have sued to block the climate protection plan. They are representing the interests of their shareholders. And they have yet to explain how they are going to reduce greenhouse gas emissions with their customer base, he said.

We heard a lot of important questions July 12. How are consumers going to be protected from rising costs? How are lower-income Oregonians going to be helped to make the switch if that is necessary? What is the true potential for alternatives gases? How well planned out is the expansion of the electrical grid if consumers switch?

We didn't hear good answers. And the first deadline for natural gas companies to start meeting emissions goals is not that far away. It's like Kim Herb, a PUC staff member, said at the July 12 meeting: "There's a lot we don't know and yet, we need to move fast."

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**NEWS ITEM: THE RUSSIANS HAVE BEEN DESTROYING BRIDGES...**



**COLUMN**

## Council supports plan to resume work on forest plans

BY SUSAN ROBERTS

To the communities surrounding the Blue Mountains National Forests:

The Blues Intergovernmental Council (BIC) supports the USDA Forest Service's plans to reinstate Forest Plan Revision for the Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests. The work completed by the BIC over the past two years has established key foundations that will be crucial components of an improved Forest Plan Revision process by reflecting local values, incorporating input, and providing robust opportunities for meaningful engagement.

On March 14, 2019, the Forest Service deputy chief issued instruction to the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Regional Forester to withdraw the Blue Mountains Revised Land Management Plans, Final Environmental Impact Statement and draft Record of Decision. This decision came after nearly 15 years of a highly contentious public planning process in which numerous community members and leaders felt frustrated, misunderstood, and ignored. The objection process yielded over 350 objections to the Forest Plans, which made clear that the public did not see how input provided had been incorporated nor did the plans fully account for the unique social and economic needs of the affected communities.

Following the withdrawal of the Blue Mountains Forest Plans, leadership from the Pa-

cific Northwest Regional Office and the Malheur, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests met with the Eastern Oregon Counties Association in April 2019, to coordinate, better understand concerns, and identify opportunities to approach forest planning and management in a new way. The participants recognized the need to explore unique approaches and work together at a larger scale, which included other government entities within and surrounding the Blue Mountains geographic area.

The various government entities officially formed the Blues Intergovernmental Council (BIC) in November 2019, to serve as an overarching entity and develop joint recommendations on the most contentious issues identified in the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision process. The BIC members include leaders from all 14 local counties, as well as federal, state, and tribal government entities. The diverse membership of the BIC ensures numerous perspectives and interests are represented.

Over the two years since the BIC formed, members worked together to develop desired conditions for Forest Service consideration on several key and previously polarizing issues in the withdrawn Blue Mountains Forest Plans, including riparian livestock grazing, fisheries, hydrology, forest health, and access. The BIC also commissioned and oversaw the completion of a so-

cioeconomic analysis that will offer data to help consider impacts of forest management decisions to local communities.

The BIC-endorsed desired conditions serve as recommendations to the Forest Service to inform the Forest Plan Revision process (with a minority report included for the access issue). The collective work over the past two years has fostered trust and strengthened relationships between the key intergovernmental groups within the BIC and the Forest Service.

The BIC members and leadership from the Blue Mountains National Forests feel this unique approach will provide a crucial foundation for success in accomplishing Forest Plan Revision for the Blue Mountains in a timely manner. By building off the past plan revision analysis, the BIC's endorsed desired conditions products, and connections that each member has with various community perspectives, we have an exceptional opportunity to develop updated Forest Plans for these National Forests that provide for the sustainable needs of the landscape and the needs of current and future generations.

Building off these accomplishments, the BIC believes that the Forest Service should move forward with the plan revision process under the 2012 Planning Rule, with the goal of working together to develop sustainable Forest Plans that reflect local values, incorporate input, and provide robust opportunities for meaningful

engagement. We support the Forest Service's plan to establish a local team and would urge this be done as quickly as possible to maintain the forward momentum the BIC has achieved in these last two years. By working together through this intergovernmental forum, the BIC can serve as a bridge between the Forest Service and communities surrounding the Blue Mountains to help repair and build trust, provide clarity about the planning process and plan components, complement Forest Service public outreach efforts, and bring continual feedback to the Forest Service regarding ways to improve the process or products.

While there will still be passion around important issues, we feel that through the joint efforts between the BIC and the Forest Service we have built important relationships and developed key recommendations that address much of the previous controversy. This has built a solid foundation to move forward now with Plan Revision.

Thank you for the consideration and recognition of the vast progress that has been made in the Blue Mountains. We look forward to working together with the Forest Service to steward these National Forest lands in a way that provides for sustainable land management while considering the communities' economic and social-cultural health.

■ Susan Roberts, a co-convenor and Wallowa County commissioner, submitted this on behalf of the Blues Intergovernmental Council.

**COLUMN**

## What's missing from the 77-minute Uvalde video?

BY JOHN M. CRISP

It's not easy to make sense of the 77-minute video shot from an overhead camera near the classrooms where 19 children and two teachers were murdered in Uvalde, Texas, on May 24.

The video — released recently by the Austin American-Statesman — has an audio track that is garbled to near-unintelligibility. The gunshots — more than a hundred — are audible, but the screams of the terrified children have been, appropriately, erased. The camera captures an important slice of the events of May 24, but only a slice.

In other words, a significant amount of the context is not represented in the video. But there's enough to deeply disturb most viewers.

An initial attempt to subdue the shooter fails. Then the video shows more than an hour of powerful-looking, well-armed men milling around in the hall, apparently uncertain what to do.

Sometimes they barricade behind ballistic shields and train four or five weapons down a long, empty hallway toward the classrooms for minutes at a time. Other times they stroll up and down the same hallway,

seemingly unconcerned.

Sometimes the officers — representing at least five law enforcement agencies — appear to be examining the building's floor plan. Sometimes they text or talk on their phones.

They gesture, wave, signal each other, appearing to plan and strategize, but then for long minutes nothing happens.

At one point, an armed, helmeted member of the sheriff's department strolls casually through an area previously barricaded by four or five men to use the wall-mounted hand sanitizer dispenser.

In short, it's hard to tell what — if anything — is happening. The word that kept occurring to me as I watched was "confusion."

Experts better trained to evaluate situations such as this one were unsparing in their criticism. Former Austin, Houston and Miami police chief Art Acevedo called the episode "the most incompetent response that I've ever seen. It's not defensible."

Acevedo is correct: The inaction of these officers is impossible to defend. But at the risk of appearing to defend them, I offer two elements of

context that aren't immediately apparent in the video:

Despite the bluster and bravado from some quarters, none of us knows how we would behave in these circumstances. After the Parkland, Florida, school shooting that killed 17, former President Donald Trump said that he would have run into the building "even if I didn't have a weapon."

Sure. But people of a more thoughtful turn of mind must concede that while they think they know what they would do, they can't know for sure until they are in the situation.

Of course, this isn't a defense of these officers. Bad leadership and a failure of courage appear to have immobilized them. If they don't have the initiative and courage to act, they are in the wrong profession.

The second element not immediately apparent in the video isn't a defense of them either.

But it illuminates the question of responsibility for the failures in Uvalde.

The Uvalde shooter grew up in a culture awash in guns. It's not just the 400 million weapons in the hands of private citizens. Gunplay is an essential element of our en-

tertainment, in movies, television and video games. Kids can't be blamed for growing up thinking that weapons are part of what it means to be an American.

The Uvalde shooter evidently had mental problems, but no one paid much attention. Nevertheless, as soon as he turned 18, we gave him legal access to high-powered, high-capacity weapons of war.

A few things the officers milling around confusedly in the hallway could be sure of: The kid was in a defensive position.

He was probably ready to die. He very likely had a magazine in his semi-automatic weapon that holds at least 30 rounds.

If you judge these officers harshly, well, they deserve it. But don't forget that we're asking them to do something that you and I might not have the courage to do.

And the most important thing that would make these officers' jobs a little safer — limiting access to high-powered, high-capacity, semi-automatic weapons — we absolutely refuse to do.

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