

## EDITORIAL

# Addressing Morrow County's water emergency

The news that the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality will restructure the composition of a key committee focused on nitrate pollution in local drinking water is a good move, but what impact the changes will be remains a mystery.

The DEQ appointed new members to the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area and triggered a move to restructure how the board operates last week.

The focus of the group is to find out what is creating the high levels of nitrates in the groundwater and then craft recommendations on how to lower those levels.

The groundwater pollution saga lingered for decades, and last summer Morrow County declared an emergency to battle contaminated drinking water. The county — with some state help — has worked on this challenge since then. Meanwhile, environmental groups petitioned the Environmental Protection Agency to assist, and the federal agency warned the state it might intervene.

The changes to the committee are certainly welcome and every little bit helps in this situation, but in the end, what, exactly, are the modifications to the board membership and its mission going to do to reduce nitrates?

What will the changes do to address the pollution situation?

Umatilla County Commissioner Dan Dorran said that people would look back on these changes and “say that we kicked the football off and started the game today. We’ve only been practicing for the last 30 years. Now we are doing it for real.”

It’s hard to make out what Dorran meant. The committee has been in existence for a while now. There should have never been any “practicing” regarding groundwater contamination.

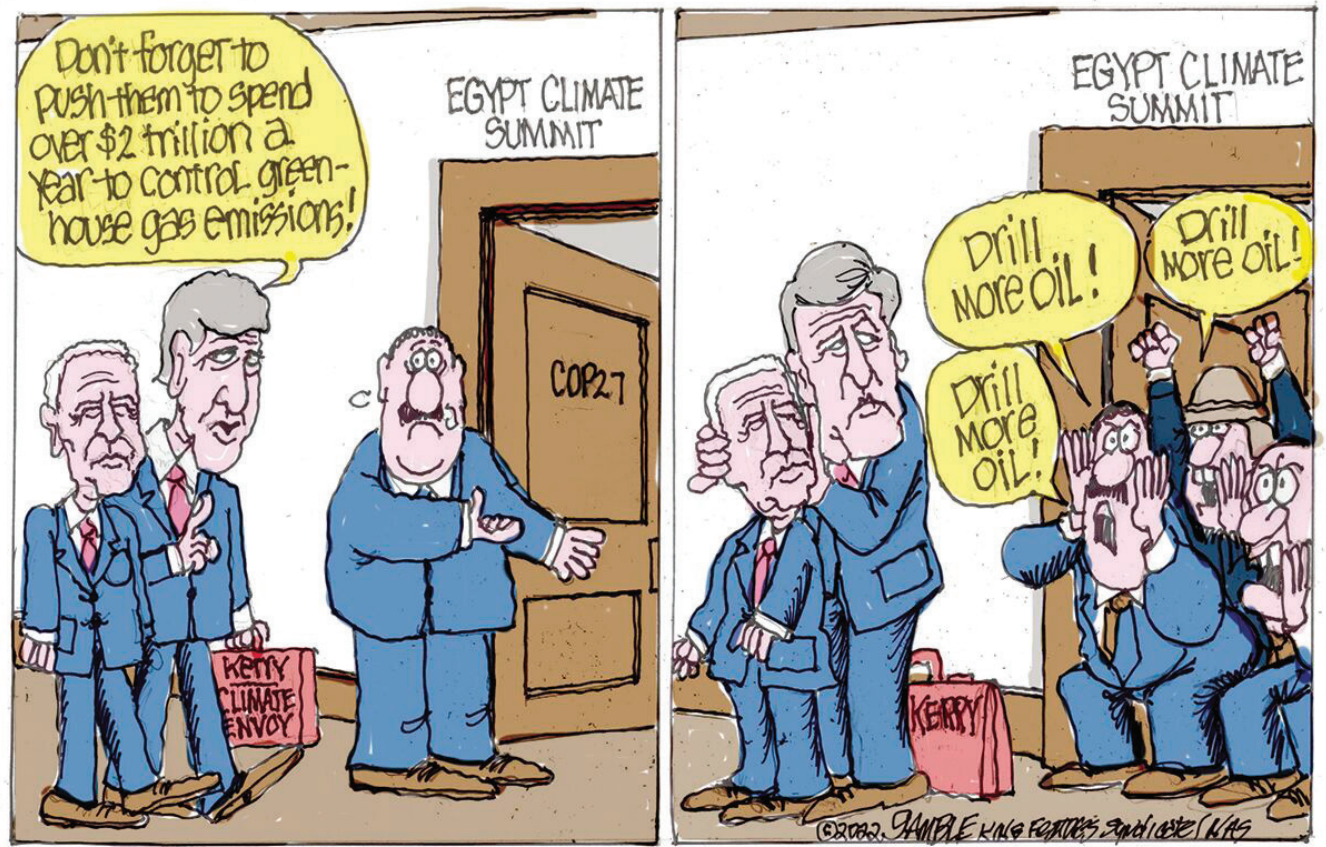
Changes to the board membership and its mission are fine, but they’re essentially administrative modifications and don’t do anything to fix what has become a world-class debacle for Oregon and local counties.

The hue and cry will be that local, regional and state leaders and officials are working hard to fix the pollution issue. We hope that is true. So far, though, there hasn’t been the kind of speed and decisiveness one would expect.

We hope the new board members prove to be crucial, and we are sure their intentions are good. Yet what voters really should be able to see is a very methodical blueprint regarding how county and state leaders are going to solve this problem.

Anything less is window dressing and simply misses the whole point.

■ *Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the Baker City Herald. Columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the Baker City Herald.*



## COLUMN

## Update GI Bill for the online era

BY SHANNON RIGGS

Each year, more than 700,000 veterans rely on the GI Bill to pay for their education, but those who pursue online degrees don’t receive their benefits in full. We must show veteran students pursuing online degrees that the country appreciates their service by asking Congress to address this oversight.

GI Bill benefits include a monthly housing allowance based on the college’s ZIP code. Students are allotted more funding in cities and towns where housing is more expensive, and less where housing is less costly. When veterans pursue degrees online, however, the housing allowance is reduced to half the national average, regardless of location or housing costs.

At Oregon State University, where I serve as the executive director of our Ecampus, the 493 veteran students who pursued

their degrees online full-time with us in 2021 faced a shortage of \$871.50 per month. (The shortage for part-time students is pro-rated, so a student taking three classes instead of four per semester would receive 80% of the housing allowance).

If the GI Bill was set up this way under the assumption that online students have more flexibility, more ability to work and less financial need, our university data shows otherwise. At Oregon State, distance students actually have greater financial need: 44% of our online students are eligible for Pell Grants, compared with 25% of our on-campus students.

Further, students who need to balance work and school — a primary reason students pursue degrees online — aren’t eligible for as many financial aid resources as full-time students.

The quality of online degree programs has increased substan-

tially since the GI Bill law was updated in 2008. As early as 2010, an authoritative U.S. Department of Education report showed “no significant difference” in learning outcomes between online and in-person courses. More recently, a 2019 study confirmed that online learning is as effective as face-to-face education in the classroom. Many education scholars believe that course design, faculty and class size are more important factors than whether college students are learning remotely or not.

Statistics from the National Center for Education highlight steady growth in student enrollment in online courses, with the COVID-19 pandemic accelerating that growth. More college students are adult learners choosing online degree programs to stay at their jobs and avoid relocating their families. Withholding half the housing allowance for online courses doesn’t make sense be-

cause, whether attending on campus or not, veteran students still have housing expenses.

The rationale behind the GI Bill was to help veterans transition from military service to civilian life. By all accounts, it has been highly successful in the more than 75 years since it was signed into law. The GI Bill more than doubled the number of college graduates in the United States while helping to educate millions of veterans.

But, unfortunately, it has fallen behind the times. Online education is here to stay, and lawmakers should update the GI Bill accordingly.

■ *Shannon Riggs is a public voices fellow of the Op Ed Project and the executive director of academic programs and learning innovation at Oregon State University Ecampus. This column was produced by Progressive Perspectives, which is run by The Progressive magazine and distributed by Tribune News Service.*

## OTHER VIEWS

## Moon mission could spur science

Editorial from The St. Louis Post-Dispatch: NASA’s Artemis program is edging toward a return to the moon — this time to stay — with its successful launch this week of an uncrewed rocket. Some Americans looking at the Earth-bound problems all around us might reasonably ask: Why? The answer is not just about the scientific discovery that a permanent presence on the moon promises but also the much-needed sense of national purpose it could recapture.

Humanity’s first climb to the moon began, rhetorically at least, in September 1962, when President John F. Kennedy defined the purpose of the endeavor: “We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things not because they are easy, but be-

cause they are hard.” Just seven years later, Neil Armstrong became the first human to set foot on an extraterrestrial surface.

The motivation for that astounding feat was, first and foremost, geopolitical. Beating the Soviet Union to the moon was another front in the Cold War, one that united Americans. The significant scientific discovery and spinoff technology that the moon missions spurred — including computer-miniaturization capabilities that ultimately made possible the laptop or cellphone on which you may be reading this editorial right now — were almost incidental.

There’s no Cold War driving things this time, which necessitates a little more explanation as to why America is returning to what it is, after all, a large cold

rock in space. First, there is the science and the basic human drive for exploration — both worthy ends in themselves. The ultimate goal, with private companies providing heavy input, is to establish a permanent moon base as a jumping-off point for exploration of Mars and beyond.

Moon rocks and soil samples collected during the Apollo missions added immensely to scientists’ understanding of the origins of the moon, Earth and the rest of the solar system. Modern testing methods, more advanced than what was available half a century ago, could add to that understanding, especially if astronauts are able to conduct experiments on the moon itself while living there.

That possibility has grown with the discovery a few years

ago that water is trapped within the moon’s seemingly barren surface. If it can be extracted and processed, it could provide not only drinking water for astronauts, but breathable air and even hydrogen rocket fuel.

Although there is no more Soviet Union to race with, geopolitical factors remain. China is planning to build and staff a lunar base in the coming decades. Allowing a global adversary that kind of scientific and strategic foothold — in orbit right above us — would be not just disheartening but potentially dangerous.

Finally, there is the unifying effect that a return to the moon could have on a deeply divided America. That cold rock in space brought Americans together once before. We need that kind of shared mission again.

## COLUMN

## Fishing contest scandal removes scales from our eyes

The slimy side of professional, high-stakes angling has at last been exposed.

Not that any reasonably observant person, whether or not experienced in the ways of the rod and the reel, needed to have the scales removed from their eyes.

Fishing, famously, is a hobby inextricably connected to a, well, malleable definition of truth.

The term “fish story” is almost synonymous with exaggeration.

But of course the key element to these tales is the one that’s always missing — the fish.

These stories would be meaningless if there were an actual fish involved, a tangible chunk of flesh and fins that can tinker with.

The whole point is that the fish in question is the “one that got away.”

Its absence affords the angler considerable latitude in describing the circumstances.

But if you bring a real fish into the matter you had best be prepared for scrutiny. Especially when tens of thousands of



Jayson Jacoby

dollars are at stake.

Two competitors at a Sept. 30 tournament in Ohio — Jacob Runyan, 42, and Chase Cominski, 35 — were either oblivious to this, or else so arrogant that they assumed they were above reproach.

One thing they absolutely are not is clever.

The pair, who were in line to pocket \$29,000, were instead disqualified from the Lake Erie Walleye Trail tournament when officials found that the five fish they had netted were, to indulge in euphemism, irregular.

Earlier this month the pair were indicted on felony charges of cheating, attempted grand theft, possessing criminal tools, and misdemeanor charges of unlawfully owning wild animals.

I would like to think these are the first people to face that exact roster of charges. But given the apparently limitless ability of humans to cheat, I doubt it.

The first fish, based on its length, ought to have weighed about 4 pounds.

But when tournament organizers put it on the scale, the figure was 8 pounds.

A couple slashes of a fillet knife revealed the sort of subterfuge I would have expected from a devious child of moderate intelligence.

The anglers had crammed several lead weights down the fish’s throat.

This, as I suggested, is hardly a subtle tactic.

But it is effective for the purpose, what with the density of lead.

Except the investigators yanked something else from the carcass that also didn’t belong — fillets from a different walleye.

On one hand this seems to suggest a certain level of cunning quite absent in the lead weight addition. Larding the fish with fillets had the advantage of being of piscatorial origin rather than chunks of heavy metal.

(Fish in many waters, including some around here, sadly do contain potentially hazardous levels of another toxic metal, mercury.)

But that metal is carried in their tissue

and thus invisible, and in tiny amounts that, so far as I can tell, have no appreciable effect on their weight.)

Using fillets to plump up a substandard walleye ought to leave the fish feeling natural, should anyone decide to run a suspicious finger along the belly.

Balls of lead, by contrast, are apt to catch the attention of even someone not intimate with the physical attributes of the typical walleye.

Also, fillets wouldn’t set off a metal detector.

I can only conclude that Runyan and Cominski lacked confidence that the surreptitious walleye fillets would be sufficient to ensure they won the tournament, and that they decided the lead weights, although potentially more risky, were necessary.

I haven’t found a detailed accounting of the event that answers what seems to me a key question — would the pair have won had they kept the lead weights in their tackle boxes and relied solely on the fillets?

Regardless, it seems obvious that, like so many cheaters, these anglers simply went overboard, so to speak.

I doubt their walleye would have attracted undue scrutiny had the fish been only modestly heavier than typical given their length.

But loading the fish with enough lead to double their expected weight was all but certain to expose the charlatans.

They could hardly have been unaware that the tournament officials knew their way around a walleye, after all.

One of the news stories I read about the case included a possible answer to my question.

An affidavit in the criminal case noted that police in a different part of Ohio had investigated allegations that Runyan and Cominski had cheated in an earlier walleye tournament.

According to a police report, the prosecutor decided there wasn’t enough evidence to charge the pair with a crime.

The story, unfortunately, doesn’t mention whether the two won that tournament.

But I’m guessing that if they employed lead in any fashion in that event, it was for a legitimate purpose.

■ *Jayson Jacoby is editor of the Baker City Herald.*