

EDITORIAL

Feds take steps to keep firefighting forces intact

With persistent drought and climate change contributing to bigger, faster-moving wildfires over the past decade, we've never had a greater need for wildland firefighters.

Which makes some of the findings in a recent federal report especially troubling.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO), the agency that audits federal programs, on Thursday, Nov. 17 released "Wildland Fire: Barriers to Recruitment and Retention of Federal Wildland Firefighters."

As the title implies, this report illustrates many of the challenges to ensure there are enough wildland firefighters to deal with the blazes that inevitably start across the West, including in Northeastern Oregon, each summer. The federal wildland firefighting force includes about 18,700 people who work for the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The most common barrier to hiring firefighters that GAO investigators heard, in interviewing federal officials as well as nongovernmental stakeholders, was low pay. The starting wage for entry-level positions has been \$15.

"Officers and stakeholders said that in some cases, firefighters can earn more at nonfederal firefighting entities or for less dangerous work in other fields, such as food service," the report states.

The GAO report is not wholly negative, however.

The authors point out that the federal government has boosted the base salary by either \$20,000 per year or 50%, whichever is less, for wildland firefighters nationwide. This provision, through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, continues through fiscal year 2026.

That's significant progress.

But low pay isn't the only challenge listed in the GAO report. Mental health issues and a poor work-life balance are also cited as difficulties in hiring and keeping firefighters.

Federal agencies are also working to address those problems, according to the report.

The federal government isn't renowned for its agility in reacting to its shortcomings. But it's heartening to see, as the GAO report notes, that officials are taking meaningful steps toward ensuring that, when the next fire season begins, there's a better chance fire crews will be ready to go.

—Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



OTHER VIEWS

Blame's on Biden for student loan mess

Editorial from The Boston Herald:

It may be a bit late in the game, but the Biden administration could benefit by creating a new Cabinet position: The Secretary of Thinking Things Through.

If the president had such an adviser, the White House wouldn't be in the position it is now, informing those applying for student loan debt relief with the website message: "At this time, we are not accepting applications."

That sotto voce statement is a far cry from Biden's fanfare, first blared on the campaign trail, that he would forgive student loan debt by up to \$20,000 for borrowers, freeing up their money to live life to the fullest.

According to Democratic cheerleaders, it was necessary, it was overdue, it was vital to the lives of those who took out massive loans.

It was also not in the president's power to make such a move.

That's the reason a U.S. District Court judge in Texas struck down the plan on Thursday, Nov. 17.

U.S. District Judge Mark Pittman,

whom The Hill noted is a Trump appointee, said the program is "an unconstitutional exercise of Congress's legislative power" and the administration would need approval from Congress to move forward.

"Whether the Program constitutes good public policy is not the role of this Court to determine," Pittman said. "Still, no one can plausibly deny that it is either one of the largest delegations of legislative power to the executive branch, or one of the largest exercises of legislative power without congressional authority in the history of the United States."

This is not unexpected. Questions as to the Constitutionality of Biden's student loan debt relief scheme had been raised for nearly as long as it had been touted. They had been raised by conservative voices, as in, people Democrats don't listen to.

If Biden had a voice of reason on staff, a No Man if you will, he could have gotten word that he'd need congressional authority to pull this off.

Of course, that precludes that this was news to him. The unfortunate truth is that

Biden was hell-bent on barreling his student loan debt plan through, whether it was in his purview or not. It was all about winning the moment, both with the coveted Democratic college-grad demographic, as well as progressives in the party.

The losers were those same college grads, gulled into thinking they could walk away from a chunk of what they owed, and now caught up short by judicial realities.

This isn't the first legal challenge to Biden's loan forgiveness plan.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 8th Circuit issued a stay on the program last month after an appeal from six Republican attorneys, according to reports.

The White House was trying to elbow the student loan program under the HEROES Act of 2003, which offers relief in cases of national emergency.

Biden could have avoided these legal battles if he had worked with Congress, as he did with the Inflation Reduction Act. But it might not have passed.

As the Secretary of Thinking Things Through might say: told you so.

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Baker City Hall: 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers. Councilors Jason Spriet, Kerry

McQuisten, Shane Alderson, Joanna Dixon, Kenyon Damschen, Johnny Waggoner Sr. and Dean Guyer.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

Baker County departments: 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Noodle Perkins, roadmaster; Greg Baxter, district attorney; Alice Dufflinger, county treasurer; Stefanie Kirby, county clerk; Kerry Savage, county assessor.

Baker School District: 2090 4th Street, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-524-2260; fax 541-524-2564. Superintendent: Mark Witty. Board meets the third Tuesday of the month at 6 p.m. Council Chambers, Baker City Hall, 1655 First St.; Chris Hawkins, Andrew Bryan, Travis Cook, Jessica Dougherty, Julie Huntington.

COLUMN

Can scientists ethically moonlight as activists?

BY NICHOLAS GOLDBERG

Peter Kalmus, a climate scientist with NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, chained himself to the doors of the Wilson Air Center in Charlotte, North Carolina, earlier this month as part of a protest against private jets and the carbon emissions they spew. He and several colleagues were arrested, handcuffed and charged with trespassing. Around the world, some 80 scientists participated in the day of protest.

"I feel like the failure of society to respond logically and rationally to the findings of climate science frankly puts my children into direct danger," Kalmus told me. "It would just be really weird if I responded to that like a vegetable and didn't do anything about it."

Allan Chornak, a wildlife biologist who (along with Kalmus) chained himself to a door of the JP Morgan Chase building in April in downtown Los Angeles, said something similar before being arrested by Los Angeles police and briefly jailed. He and other scientists were protesting the company's role in financing the fossil fuel industry.

"We've tried being unbiased, we've tried being silent, we've tried the policy game..." said Chornak about his fellow scientist-activists, 1,000 of whom reportedly participated in April and May protests globally. "We have tried everything."

Kalmus, Chornak and their colleagues believe it is their moral responsibility as scientists to help awaken society to the dangers of climate change,

which include not just more of the raging storms, droughts, wildfires and heat waves we're already experiencing, but very possibly famine, mass migration, collapsing economies and war.

I think they're right.

But as more and more scientists have become engaged in climate activism over the years, they have faced pushback from traditionalists who insist that scientists should be disinterested, impartial "seekers of truth" who keep their opinions to themselves, thank you very much.

Because, after all, science is the domain of facts, not emotions, where open-mindedness and objectivity are at the very core and foundation of the work. Political advocacy is frowned upon.

This is not an unreasonable or unfamiliar argument.

The scientific method itself is built on the notion of "values-free" thinking, which is presumed to lead to more honest, more credible results. For hundreds of years, scientists have embraced empiricism and impartiality through processes like measurement and quantification, and repetition and verification. And through random sampling and double blind trials designed to weed out bias and boost credibility.

Scientists with ideological axes to grind and preconceived points of view can compromise outcomes or diminish public confidence in results, goes the argument.

"I believe advocacy by climate scien-

tists has damaged trust in the science," wrote University of Bristol climate scientist Tamsin Edwards in a much-dis-

cussed article in the Guardian 15 years ago. "We risk our credibility, our reputation for objectivity, if we are not absolutely neutral."

She also said scientists have to be vigilant against what she called "stealth issue advocacy" — "claiming we're talking about science when really we're advocating policy."

Edwards believes that science belongs to the scientists and policy should be left to the policymakers. I see the point, and in a perfect world, I might agree. But these days Kalmus (who is a member of a group called Scientist Rebellion) and his colleagues have the stronger argument.

The situation has become too desperate. We've reached a point in the climate crisis where silence actually is a kind of complicity. Neutrality is a cop-out.

Like the rest of us, scientists are human beings, with opinions, emotions and social consciences. Those who

choose to be engaged citizens have a right to do so.

Kalmus says he keeps his politics out of his work. And when the findings of climate scientists are being ignored by world leaders and misrepresented by corporations, what moral choice do he and his colleagues have other than to speak up on their own time?

And who has the ability to speak with more authority than the experts themselves?

"Like all scientists, we were trained to maintain a type of neutrality in all things..." Rose Abramoff, a climate scientist who was also ar-

rested last week in North Carolina, told a local reporter. "But we do speak from a place of greater credibility because of our educational background, and because of our training in the climate sciences."

I don't believe activism has to taint a scientist's work or detract from its credibility. If Kalmus, Abramoff and Chornak follow the facts where they lead in their day jobs, then what's wrong with off-hours political engagement designed to call attention to their work and its ramifications? (You can agree or disagree with the decision to engage in civil disobedience, but that's a separate issue.)

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One more point: It's not the protesting scientists but their opponents who have politicized climate science. The fossil fuel industry has spent billions of dollars over half a century to sow misinformation and cover up or minimize what the science tells us about emissions and global warming. If legitimate researchers now chain themselves to a few doors to counter the slick, well-heeled industry shills and to express the consensus view of the scientific community, they're unpoliticizing the issue, if anything.

The simple truth is that policymakers around the world are utterly failing to address the climate crisis with the urgency it demands, and ordinary people are inadequately informed and insufficiently focused on the impending perils.

When scientists advocate for honest, rational, science-driven solutions without compromising the quality of the work they do in their day jobs, we're all in their debt.

■ Nicholas Goldberg is an associate editor and Op-Ed columnist for the Los Angeles Times.