

Saving the forests from wildfire

After another devastating year of wildfires in Oregon and across the West, the national forest health bill approved by the House Wednesday is a breath of fresh air.

The Resilient Federal Forest Act of 2017, H.R. 2936, would make significant strides toward preventing the clouds of smoke choking our communities every summer as we watch our homes, wildlife habitat and economic livelihood burn with our forests.

In the last decade, wildfires have consumed more than 36,000 structures. From the homes lost locally in 2015's Canyon Creek Complex to this year's Eagle Creek Fire in the Columbia Gorge, more people are realizing just how dire the situation is on many of our national forests. With hotter and drier conditions expected in the future, it will only get worse.

Despite bipartisan agreement on the severity of the problem, little has been accomplished in Washington, D.C., to address it. Oregon Rep. Greg Walden said, with support from the Trump administration, the bill this year actually has a "good opportunity."

Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, both Democrats, have championed a major component of this bill — ending "fire borrowing," where funds intended for fire prevention through active forest management are re-appropriated to cover the ever-increasing cost of fighting fires. We hope they will work through any other issues they may have to support this bill.

Critics of the bill claim it would promote clearcutting, wiping out vast swaths of trees to appease logging interests, but that assertion is misguided. The bill mandates that all forest management activities "shall be conducted in a manner consistent with the forest plan," which is developed to meet the Forest Service's multiple-use mandate to balance competing interests, including logging and recreation. In short, the forests will not be clearcut.

What the bill actually does is streamline the environmental review process for certain high-priority projects, such as reducing the risk of wildfire, addressing insect and disease infestations and protecting

wildlife habitat and municipal water sources. Even then, those projects are limited to a maximum of 10,000 acres — unless developed by a collaborative group when the maximum is increased to 30,000 acres. For perspective, the Malheur National Forest alone comprises 1.7 million acres.

And the streamlined process — providing categorical exclusions to address high-risk situations — still requires soliciting public feedback through the scoping process and reviewing for extraordinary circumstances, such as endangered species, wetlands and watersheds. The process, according to the Government Accountability Office, still takes six months on average — far better than the stymieing 4.5-year average for environmental impact statements, but far from a rubber stamp ignoring environmental issues.

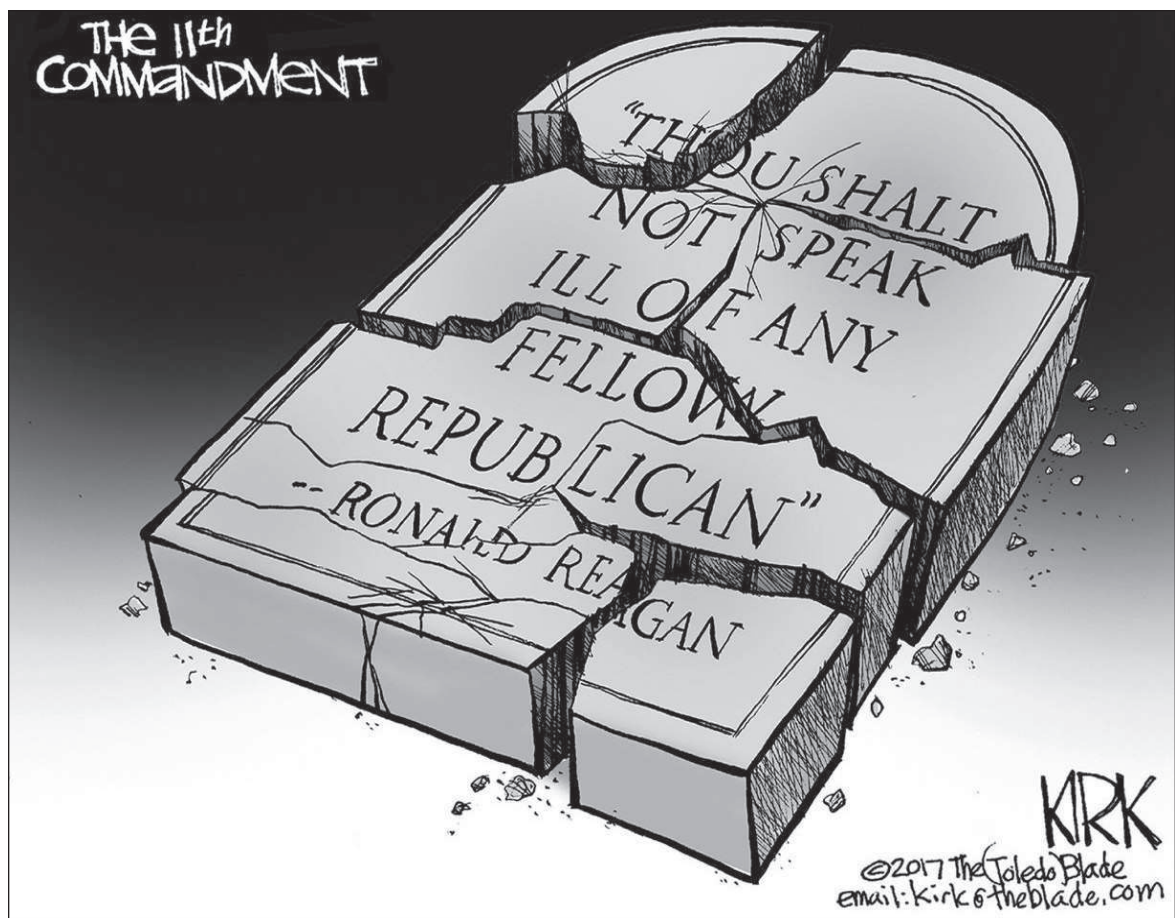
The bill would provide other benefits as well, especially in Eastern Oregon. The rule preventing the harvest of trees greater than 21 inches in diameter — which local forest officials have said sometimes results in unhealthy forest areas — would finally be rescinded.

The bill would also require the Forest Service to consult with the county government before decommissioning a road within a designated highly fire-prone area and to solicit possible alternatives to closing the road. Compared to a national road density goal issued from D.C. without regard for the conditions on the ground, this would allow greater flexibility to maintain access to be able to fight the catastrophic fires devastating our communities.

Congressman Walden succinctly summed up the current situation: "Fires burn dramatically, catastrophically and very destructively. They don't go through any analysis. They don't get permission first. They just go."

Without action, they will continue to do so — taking homes and habitat indiscriminately.

We urge Sens. Wyden and Merkley to consider the inevitable consequences of inaction and to support this bill to save our forests and our communities.



GUEST COMMENT

A common cadence to serve and honor Oregon's veterans

By Cameron Smith
To the Blue Mountain Eagle



Cameron Smith

Nov. 11 originally marked the armistice between the Allied nations and Germany in World War I. Today, Veterans Day honors the service and sacrifice of all Americans who have raised their right hand, worn the uniform, defended our freedom and stood guard over our peace.

After the guns fell silent on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918, WWI service members did not come home to a robust veterans' health and benefit system. They banded together in service organizations and fought to advocate for the system of support we have today.

They helped found the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs in 1945 and our team is proud to continue their advocacy.

The common cadence across our over 70-year history is our timeless mission to serve and honor Oregon veterans.

At the same time, we know that the success of our efforts depends on the leadership of Oregon's veterans and community partners across the state. Together, we continue to make a difference.

Over the past two years, the veteran community and partners

have tirelessly advocated for additional resources to support veterans and their families. Citizens across the state added their voice in November 2016 when they approved, by a resounding 84 percent, to amend the state's Constitution to dedicate 1.5 percent of net lottery revenues to better serve Oregon's veterans.

Through the bipartisan leadership of the governor and legislature this year, Oregon has approved a historic investment in veteran services — funds that will go to ensure the health, education and economic opportunity of our veterans and their families.

The resulting budget invests significantly in veteran services at the local level as well as in efforts to support nonprofit and community partners.

There is a particular focus to mobilize partnerships to better support student veterans on campus, ensure all veterans have access to mental health resources and prevent veterans from becoming homeless.

As we build a system to better serve all veterans, we also have targeted outreach to underserved

veteran populations. This includes Vietnam veterans, the largest segment of our veterans' community and a group that was not welcomed home in their own time and has unique issues as they age.

We also have been proud to better connect to Oregon's LGBTQ and women veterans.

Women veterans are the fastest rising demographic in our veterans' community, and we must continue to do better to help them access benefits and resources. We proudly stand as an advocate for all veterans and service members who served with honor.

Ultimately, the diversity of our veterans' community does not divide us, but unites us. There is a shared bond across all veterans no matter where we live or when we served.

As four generations of veterans across five major wars, we stand on the shoulders of all those who have come before us. And together as advocates, we will continue to charge the hill for our veterans and their families.

Thank you for your continued dedication, advocacy and support!

Cameron Smith served three tours in Iraq as a U.S. Marine and is the director of the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Local dispatchers know area, people

To the Editor:

I am not a resident of Grant County. However, I am a veteran of 53 years of public safety service including 15 years as a chief of police, six years as a fire/EMS chief and 8 1/2 years as director of Baker County's 911 dispatch center. For Grant County to suffer the loss of its dispatch center would be a disservice to every person who resides in the county.

No outside dispatch center would know the people of the county and the first responders like your current 911 dispatch staff does.

If you want to see just how difficult it is to dispatch those whom you do not know to places you have never been, to help people you have never met, just listen to the Oregon State Police dispatch center.

It is located on the west side of the state, and while their staff are good people, they have not a clue about a county they have never even visited.

The proposed tax is minimal and short term. Its passage may save lives in Grant County and is well worth you voting in favor of it.

Jerry Boyd
Baker City

House Resolution 2936 sells out Oregon

To the Editor:

Wildfires are a problem for Oregonians and selling out our natural resources, endangered species and public process is not the answer, and that is why I oppose HR 2936.

Wildfires affect Oregonians in a profound way. The threat to housing, loss of grazing land for cattle, the high cost of replacing fencing — not to mention the veterinary supplies and medications needed to sustain the herd after such a tragedy — is a great strain on the farmers and ranchers. Add to this the devastation of the land that we all hold dear, and the impact of wildfires is almost unimaginable.

House Resolution 2936 would gut protections already in place and

promote clearcutting forests that we have set aside for our future generations. It is important to both create sustainable new growth for the timber industry and to protect forests that provide habitat for wildlife and threatened species.

We will not solve the problem by selling out our natural resources or by silencing public input.

What we need is sustainable forestry management. By giving appropriate funding to the United States Forest Service they will be able to remove the underbrush, allowing young trees to grow and create their own sustainable ecosystem which will limit devastating wildfires. This sensible approach will create jobs and help contain wildfires that endanger families and livestock, and allow wildfires to burn where they are contributing to the overall health of forests.

If HR 2936 becomes law, Oregon will suffer a devastating loss in natural resources and family farms that have already been hit hard by wildfire.

Jamie McLeod-Skinner
Congressional District 2
Democratic candidate

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