

Merkley: 'We're starting a new chapter in America'

Oregon Senator Jeff Merkley provides thoughts on Biden's inauguration and hopes of unity for the future

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

Inauguration Day marks a new chapter for America, U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley told Oregon reporters Jan. 20.

This ceremony to install the new president was different. Merkley said many moments stood out: the National Guard troops stationed at the Capitol to prevent protests, an empty National Mall filled with 200,000 flags, the absence of former President Donald Trump, Vice President Kamala Harris making



Contributed photo

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley shares his experience of Inauguration Day 2021 during a Zoom call with Oregon reporters.

history as the first woman, Black American and South Asian-American to hold the office and new President Joe Biden's address stressing unity. Merkley said the country must come together to address the COVID-19 pandemic and the asso-

ciated economic crisis.

"If there's one place where we should be able to work together to accelerate our efforts, it's in this area," Merkley said.

He said the pledge Biden made to organize a vaccine program that will vaccinate 100 million people over his first 100 days in office is a great way to start.

The challenge of creating unity between the political parties will not be easy, Merkley said, requiring elected officials to reach across the aisle on issue after issue.

Merkley said he wished Trump decided, as a final act, to show up at Biden's inauguration to honor the tradition of a peaceful transition.

"I think the message from (Biden) is one of reconciliation and partnership and that is very different from the message of division

and bigotry that we have had over the last four years," Merkley said.

Tackling the pandemic and its economic impact will be the first order of business at the Senate, Merkley said, adding they must also move forward with the second impeachment trial of Trump.

"We will proceed," Merkley said. "Obviously, the potential punishment of evicting someone out of office is not there, but the Constitution calls for two potential forms of punishment. The second of which is barring an individual from holding any future office."

Merkley said the Senate must also confirm Biden's cabinet members. Then, he said, the focus will shift to the fundamentals: health care, housing, education and good-paying jobs.

"We're starting a new chapter in America," Merkley said.

Natural Resources Advisory Committee elects new chairman

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Grant County's Natural Resources Advisory Committee installed a new chairperson Thursday.

The committee voted in Chairperson Pat Voigt, a long-time Grant County rancher, who was nominated by Austin resident Billie Jo George.

George, who had served as the NRAC chair, said the committee could use Voigt's experience as the chairperson of the Grant County Soil and Water District.

The committee also named Tim Rude from Rude Logging as the vice chair, and George was named committee secretary.

George said the committee still needs the Grant County Court to approve NRAC's bylaws.

The group discussed old business, consisting mostly of County Commissioner and committee liaison Jim Hamsher's report from the Blue Mountain Intergovernmental Committee meeting. Formed in 2019, the BIC is a collective of state, tribal, federal and county representatives created to resolve long-standing conflicts over the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur national forests, which have been meeting over the last year.

The BIC has been meeting monthly in subcommittee meetings that deal with four different forest management areas, including wildfire management, access, socioeconomic assessment and grazing, according to Hamsher.

Hamsher, who attended both the access and socioeconomic subcommittee meetings last month, said access had been the most contentious topic so far.

Hamsher said the county is hoping to hear back about the Travel Management Plan. He told the committee BIC would be meeting in the next couple of days with Chris French from the U.S. Forest Service to see where the Forest Service is at with the county's petition to opt-out of the Travel Management Plan.

In a Jan. 15 email, State Rep. Mark Owens said there was nothing new to report with the new administration's transition.

"Chris did say he is still very committed to our communities and helping with the relationships with the forest service," Owens said. "We look forward to continuing to work with him."

Bill Skinner, who worked for the Forest Service and is now retired, said there is no way to have any activities, be it logging or anything, without a travel plan.

"How are you going to have your activities if you don't have a road, if you don't have access?" Skinner said.

Skinner said the travel plan encompasses trails too, and that can be a "constricting program."

Hamsher said, when the county submitted the petition, the Department of Agriculture said they would likely not get an answer until after the presidential election.

"We'll see what the direction the new administration might take," he said.



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

Tim Rude, left, of Rude Logging and Brett Morris of Morris Logging attend the Natural Resources Advisory Committee meeting Jan. 14 at the Grant County Courthouse.

Firewise update

Firewise Coordinator Irene Jerome gave the NRAC a brief overview of the Community Wildfire Protection Plan and what it entails. She also walked the committee through a potential incentive-based juniper removal program. Jerome said the county is "losing the fight" to juniper, a significant fuel for wildfire.

She said, while some landowners are diligent in removing the trees, others are not. Jerome asked the NRAC what an incentive might be to create a sense of urgency among residents.

Rude said the way to drive more juniper removal

would be property tax. But at the same time, he said, the county needs to have an outlet for the material. He said there are dead pine and lodgepole throughout the forest, and there is nowhere to take the dead trees.

"We've narrowed down to one sawmill," he said. "Very seldom do they ever buy outside fiber or pulp

from anybody."

Rude said the county does not have a good outlet for private timber sales.

Hamsher said he would like to get the co-generation plant running again and start chipping the dead trees or bringing a wood chipper out to those areas, but the cost to undertake the project would require various kinds of gov-

ernment subsidies.

Jerome said, at the end of the day, it's about getting people to remove the fuels before they become a fire hazard.

"If people can get it through their heads, they are not going to get a bunch of money for it, but if you get rid of it revenue-neutral, I mean, you're a winner," she said.

The group talked about grants and other funding streams but agreed that it would be more beneficial for the county to find a way to enhance the county's natural resources and perhaps create jobs.

"Recreation is fine," she said. "But it is heavily dependent on the general economy, and the whims change with the public."

She said jobs in natural resources are more "value-added."

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Disaster Assistance for 2020 Livestock Forage Losses

Producers in Harney and Grant County are eligible to apply for 2020 Livestock Forage Disaster Program (LFP) benefits on small grain, native pasture and improved pasture.

LFP provides compensation if you suffer grazing losses for covered livestock due to drought on privately owned or cash leased land or fire on federally managed land.

County committees can only accept LFP applications after notification is received by the National Office of qualifying drought or if a federal agency prohibits producers from grazing normal permitted livestock on federally managed lands due to qualifying fire. You must complete a CCC-853 and the required supporting documentation no later than February 1, 2021, for 2020 losses.

For additional information about LFP, including eligible livestock and fire criteria, contact your Harney-Grant County USDA Service Center at 541-573-6446 Ext. 2 or visit fsa.usda.gov.

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