The INDEPENDENT

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Opinion

Hard to find source of giardia outbreak

The answer about whether the giardia microorganism does or doesn't exist in Vernonia's filtered and treated water depends on who is responding to the question.

But first, an explanation for those fortunate folks who haven't been introduced to this microscopic monster: Giardia causes severe intestinal gas and watery diarrhea that can't be controlled by over-the-counter anti-diarrheal medications. It requires a prescription medication for relief and is a common problem in the Northwest. Giardia is carried into the water supply by animal (beaver, coyote and other mammals) feces and is sometimes called beaver fever.

The City's public works director, Robyn Bassett, considers talk of giardia in the water system a serious and erroneous charge.

"I have contacted the Oregon Health Division and no cases of giardia were reported to have affected any Vernonia residents," Bassett said.

She is outraged that Vernonia Health Center personnel have told city residents to boil their water before using it, pointing out that the VHC staff lacks knowledge of both the treatment process used by the city and how to operate it.

At the Health Center, Physician's Assistant Laura Nichols agrees that the state Health Division has no confirmed cases of giardia among Vernonia residents.

"I don't usually order the test that would confirm Giardia," Nichols said, "because it's expensive and unnecessary. When over-the-counter medications can't stop diarrhea and it responds only to the prescription medication that is used specifically for giardia, then it's giardia."

The problem here is that both agencies involved in this situation are correct.

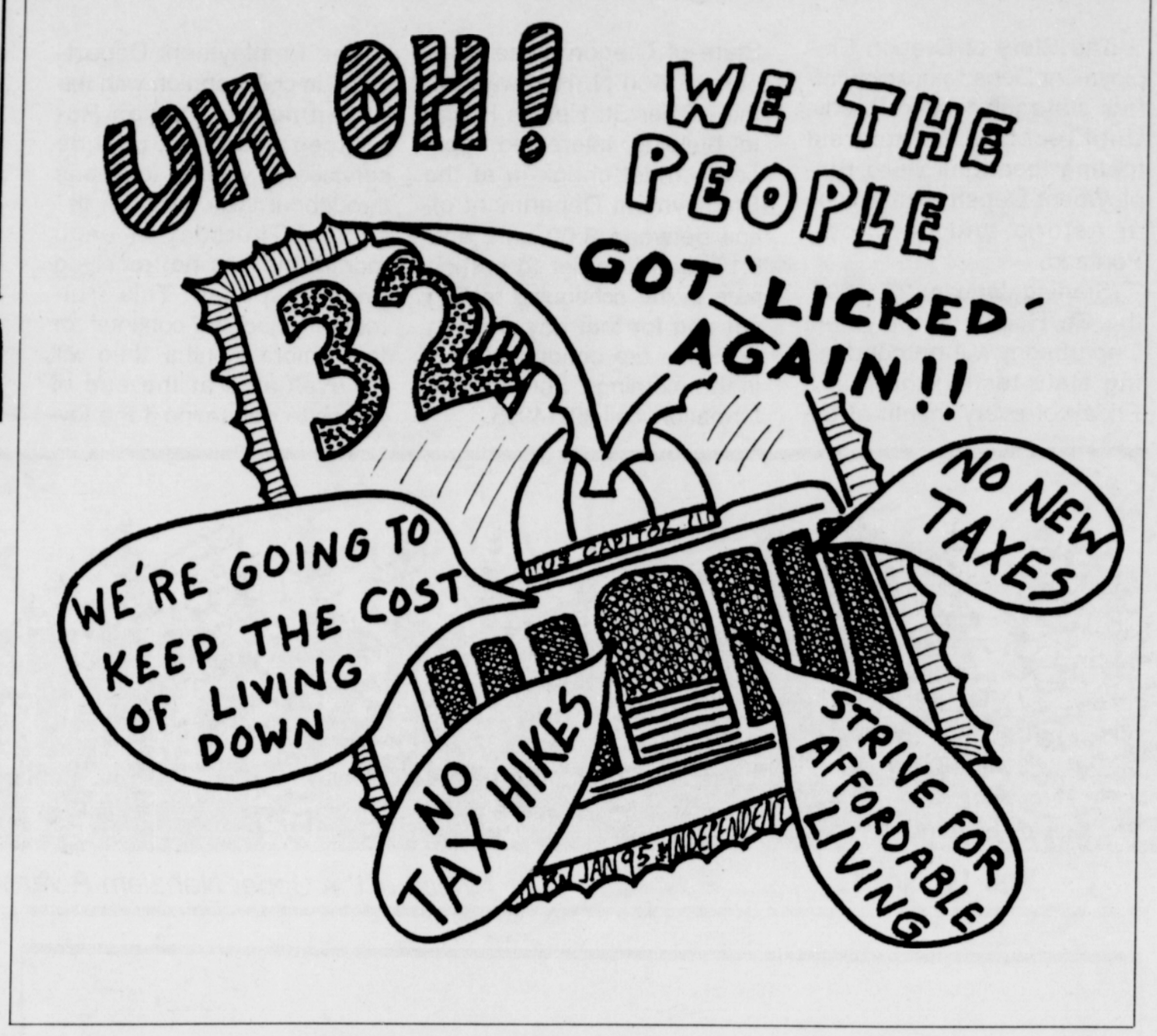
The giardia microorganism is so small that it has been known to pass through even the finest water filtration systems, that's one reason it's such a common problem. It also gets into well water. City water is tested on a regular basis and there have been no detectable contaminants in the water for <u>many</u> years. We are all fortunate that Bassett takes this responsibility so seriously. In spite of that, there have been several cases of giardia in the city.

For reasons not fully understood, giardia seem to thrive when the water is high, as it has been for several weeks. It can come and go so quickly in a surface water system like Vernonia's that it sometimes remains undectable, even with regular testing.

It's likely that the only way we could know for certain how many Oregonians are afflicted with giardia, would be through mandatory testing of each suspected case and, as Nichols said, that's an unnecessary expense; we wouldn't recommend such an action.

Nevertheless, Bassett and Water Supervisor Tom Helfly shouldn't feel bad. They are doing everything within their power to keep Vernonia's water supply clean and trouble-free.

Some things are just not within our power to control.



Ike Says

By Dale Webb, member
Izaak Walton League, Nehalem Valley Chapter

One of my recent columns, about landowner responsibilities along streams, brought a letter to the editor response from Scott Sword, the former Mayor of Vernonia. Scott was correct on several accounts. He pointed out that timberland owners shoulder most of the stream-side riparian protection through the Forest Practices Act and, secondly, that overfishing of salmonid stocks is partly to blame for the current condition of our local fisheries.

Sometimes, when writing these articles, I forget that the reading public is not always informed about things I assume they know. The Forest Practices Act was adopted in 1971 and regulates forest operations on private and state lands. The act has been revised several times, most recently in 1987 and 1991, in order to provide more protection for natural resources. The 1987 revision added new rules to the riparian section requiring minimum levels of snag retention, downed woody material protection, canopy retention and, in Western Oregon, conifer retention.

In 1991, the legislature passed Senate Bill 1125, which required the Department of Forestry and the Board of Forestry to revise the section on water protection rules of the Forest Protection Act. This revision was finally completed and enacted this year. The rules are of course more complicated and generally require that more conifers be left standing on the stream banks. The maximum width of stream side protection under the new rules is 100 feet on a large fish-bearing stream, not 300 feet as on Federal lands.

I try not to point my finger at any one landowner group, since this just seems to polarize people instead of helping them realize that they are only one part of a complex problem. Nevertheless, the facts are that timberland owners are doing their part, but agricultural and residential property owners are not. Of course they are not mandated by law to provide stream protection—yet.

Scott correctly mentioned the over-fishing of salmon as a reason for a decline in current salmonid populations. As with any resource that is commercialized, there is always pressures to maintain the status quo, even if it is not realistic (this sure sounds familar). Another factor in this problem is the flawed methodology the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife was using to trend their fish populations, which didn't become apparent until things got serious.

Scott also mentioned that he quit buying fish at the market because he didn't want to add to the overfishing problem. This may be noble, but is most likely not a factor in today's picture. Most fish in our markets are from either fish farms or fisheries that are not suffering population depletions; i.e. Alaska. By not buying fish, you may be causing further suffering for an Oregon commercial fisherman who is fishing exclusively on hatchery-only stocks or healthy wild Chinook runs. This is the same as someone not buying wood products because there isn't very much old growth timber left, when in fact there are ongoing sustainable timber operations.

The phony issue of ODF&W introducing bacterial and pathological agents into the river is nothing but an old wives' tale. It started from ODF&Ws use of fish in their hatchery program that were not resistant to a parasite called Ceratomyxa Shasta. According to the tale, because the fish were not resistant to this parasite, it became concentrated in them and elevated the disease to such a high level in the stream that even the wild salmonids became infected and died. It sounds good but doesn't hold much water. Ceratomyxa Shasta infects salmonids only down river of the confluence of Humbug Creek with the Nehalem River. As fish pass through this area, they are infected and die if they are not resistant to the parasite. ODF&W planted smolts in the upper Nehalem that were not C. Shasta resistant and, once they passed through the infected area, most perished. Another reason this old story doesn't hold water is that C. Shasta is not transmittable from fish to fish, so even if a smolt survived the first infection and was able to carry it back upstream as an adult, it could not transmit it to other fish–which most likely are carriers of the parasite anyway. A third reason that this is not a disease problem is that fish numbers have dropped dramatically, not only in our streams but, coast wide.

On this subject, though, ODF&W District Bi-

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