

## OPINIONS

# When a problem becomes an opportunity

BY LISA E. BALDWIN

From Wilderville to Ruch and Murphy to Wonder, neighbors are concerned about decreased recycling opportunities. Shortly after Southern Oregon Sanitation (SOS) notified us about reduced paper and plastic recycling, I called Trent Carpenter, general manager of SOS. He said that losing the Chinese market for our recycled material caused SOS and other disposal and recycling companies, like Republic, to decide to collect only sellable recycled material—newspaper, corrugated cardboard, and white or clear milk jugs.

This is bad news indeed, considering the role plastics play in climate change. Not only does the production of plastic release greenhouse gases into the environment, but researchers from the University of Hawaii report that discarded plastics exposed to sunlight and seawater continue to release methane and ethylene as they degrade (“Production of methane and ethylene from plastic in the environment,” *PLOS ONE*, August 2018).

Now consider the latest findings about climate change: (1) The 2018 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that we have only 12 years before reaching the tipping point in global warming. (2) By 2030 we will be at the point of no return in this ecological catastrophe of our own making. (3) Seventeen of the 18 hottest years on record have occurred since 2001. (4) The rise in mean temperature worldwide has already caused “unstoppable melting” of both the Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets (“When the ice melts,” *The Guardian*, January 2019).

It is way past time to get to work on solutions before it is truly too late. Here in the Applegate watershed, we have the resources to take the lead to solve the plastic recycling problem by investing as a community in bioplastic manufacturing plants and mills. We can address many needs by creating a local market for recycling our plastics and local markets for industrial hemp and living-wage jobs, while also boosting

the local economy. And we’ll be at the forefront of the best growth industry of the next decade.

Many products, from plastic lumber to T-shirts, lawn furniture to carpet, are already made from bioplastic composites of recycled polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic and hemp. Mohawk’s EverStrand carpet fiber is more than 95 percent recycled PET. A new line of kitchen cabinets from IKEA uses reclaimed wood covered in a plastic veneer made from recycled bottles; each cabinet front puts about 25 half-liter bottles to good reuse.

We could manufacture composite bioplastics right here in southern Oregon, put some vacant mill sites back into industrial production, and create our own market for recycling plastics.

The other side of our plastic solution is to reduce and eventually eliminate our use of carbon-based plastic. Once again, our burgeoning hemp industry comes to the rescue. Hemp plastic, a bioplastic made entirely from hemp fiber, is a viable substitute for plastic made from fossil fuels. It is recyclable and can be 100 percent biodegradable, taking three to six months to fully decompose. It can replace all single-use plastics like to-go cups, shopping bags, and packaging. We should seize the opportunity this emerging growth industry offers our

community. We can build a stronger economy and contribute to the better health of the planet as well.

Eight million tons of plastic waste is dumped in our oceans every year. Some industry leaders are starting to talk about reducing plastic production and improving recycling, but it seems to be lip service only. The Alliance to End Plastic Waste, an ironically named international corporate association, committed a billion dollars to their stated cause. But many of the same types of companies have invested more than \$180 billion since 2010 on new fracking facilities to supply a projected 40 percent increase in carbon-based plastic production in the coming decade (“Founders of plastic waste alliance ‘investing billions in new plants,’” *The Guardian*, January 2019).

The time to tackle this problem is now. We can’t wait for Chinese markets to reopen or count on the petrochemical industry to put planet over profit. But we *can* recognize an opportunity when it comes along. If we marshal our collective will and community resources, we can solve our own plastic problem, build our economy, and lead the way into a cleaner, greener future.

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**Note:** *Interested in pursuing these ideas? The author welcomes emails!*

# Can Oregon lead by example?

BY ALAN JOURNET

Those reveling in misinformation, alternative facts, fake news, and rejection of data and the consensus of climate scientists are apt to conclude that the freezing conditions that consumed the Midwest earlier this year are evidence that global warming isn’t happening. It may seem counterintuitive, but such conditions are entirely consistent with what current climate science predicts. Somewhat more consistent with our expectations are trends evident in the Applegate Valley. Here, increasing temperatures combine with reduced snowpack and more variable annual precipitation to produce dry soils and vegetation, which increase wildfire risk. Indeed, the escalation of smoke we have experienced over the last few years is probably a result of global warming and will only get worse unless

we respond appropriately and with necessary urgency.

The question we should ask ourselves is simple: Do we want the warming to continue or should we try to halt that trend as best we can? Back in 2007, the Oregon legislature enacted a program that identified reduction goals for greenhouse gas emissions that were remarkably forward-thinking and noteworthy. Although purely voluntary, these goals placed our state at the forefront of climate action.

Unfortunately, our state is not on a trajectory to achieve the goals established in that program. Emissions reductions are simply not happening.

We know Oregon’s contribution to the global output of greenhouse gases is very small, and we would like others to bail us out by substantially reducing

their emissions. But how do we ask them to do that if we are simply not making a reasonable effort ourselves to reduce emissions? Clearly, without taking steps ourselves, without leading by example, we have no credibility or moral authority to ask reductions of other states and nations across the globe.

After many years of considering and rejecting proposals that would place Oregon on a trajectory to achieve our 2007 goals, the 2019 Oregon legislature is on the brink of considering a proposal that would remedy the situation. Those balking at the possibility that the proposed program might impose undue costs on Oregonians should pause, reflect, and ask themselves some questions.

First, let’s reflect on our luck. Since the Industrial Revolution in the 1700s, we have enjoyed the tremendous benefits of cheap fossil-fuel energy and an advancing technology that has liberated us from the heavy labor required in so many human activities from agriculture and forestry to manufacturing. But the benefits we have reaped come with costs long unregistered and unseen. We now know the cost of this fossil-fuel revolution has been an increase in emissions of greenhouse gases. Our understanding of this problem began in the 1800s, expanded through the 1900s, and is now well understood. Our luck is running out, and it’s time to consider what we can do to protect this planet for our children and their children. The first question is whether we are prepared to take the necessary steps to resolve the

problem we have created. Do we care enough about our kids to act?

To be sure, addressing the problem will result in changes in how we think and how we live and may have an economic impact. But if we think such changes are unconscionable, we should ask ourselves what life will be like for those children and grandchildren we love so much if we have destroyed our forests, our agriculture, and our fisheries.

The recent National Climate Assessment report issued by 13 agencies of our current government tells us that global warming impacts are real, here, and now. Meanwhile, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change informs us that if we wish to keep global warming to 1.5 degrees centigrade (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial revolution levels, we must reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by 45 percent by 2030 and eliminate them by 2050. Yes, indeed, the situation and prognosis are alarming! But anyone who has experienced cancer and survived knows that the appropriate response to an alarming diagnosis is to take action immediately.

We in Oregon have a chance to become leaders in taking appropriate action. We can help to protect our Applegate corner of paradise by urging our representatives to pass meaningful greenhouse gas emissions reduction legislation in 2019. We cannot postpone this until later. Later *is* now.

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