

# Opinion

## NO BAD DAYS

### Trendy on the 'east side'

In the prevailing political climate, here's something worth remarking on: Okanogan County, widely regarded as a bastion of "red" politics, is outperforming the rest of the state in COVID-19 vaccination rates.



Don Nelson

The county's success in vaccinating a significant part of its population countervails the No. 1 indicator of resistance to vaccines: whether you voted for Donald Trump. According to recent polls, nearly half of Republican men don't intend to get vaccine, and trust Trump's advice over that of the nation's best medical minds (Trump himself has been vaccinated). In the 2020 general election, 56% of the county's vote went to Donald Trump.

As we are reporting this week, "with 35.8% of its population receiving at least one dose and 28.2% fully vaccinated, Okanogan County is beating the state averages of 32.68% and 20.85%, respectively."

Okanogan County's excellent performance and vaccination efficiency have taken place with little fanfare. Recently, Seattle Times columnist Danny Westneat—whose work I admire—wrote about the discrepancy between "east side" and "west side" vaccination rates in the state.

As Westneat noted: "10 counties with the lowest vaccination rates have all seen 22% or fewer of their residents get the first shot so far— with nine of those 10 being red counties east of the Cascades ... Chelan County, in Central Washington, has a 39.5% vaccination rate, defying the general east-west trend."

No mention of us, quietly defying the same trend and going about our business in the state's largest county.

I think there are several reasons why Okanogan County is performing well relative to the rest of the state.

- Okanogan County Community Health Director Lauri Jones has been a relentless advocate for COVID-combating protocols and for an aggressive vaccination program. She he taken on the county commissioners when she thought they were not being responsive enough, and faced death threats for her steadfast support of science, rationality and proactivity in the fight against the coronavirus. Okanogan County remains in Phase 3 of the state's recovery plan, while three counties slipped back to Phase 2 this week.

- Our hospitals are all nonprofits supported by taxpayers in their respective hospital districts. Family Health Centers is also nonprofit. As small rural health providers, they face extreme bottom line pressures but don't have to answer to invested shareholders.

Individually, these health organizations have worked hard to come up with manageable vaccination plans. They have also cooperated as much as possible, with active participation by other providers including Confluence Health, Aero Methow Rescue Service and similar emergency response organizations, and pharmacies such as Ulrich's in Twisp.

As our story this week notes, "When vaccinations began in January, each provider offering the shots had separate registration processes, which caused confusion and overlapping work ... About three weeks ago, the county debuted its centralized portal, run through the same program—but using completely separate data—as the county's emergency notification system." That action has consolidated and streamlined the process to make it even more efficient.

- While most of Okanogan County glows Republican red, the Methow Valley leans Democratic, even liberal. We wear masks, and expect visitors to wear masks. We're all about getting the shots. That makes a difference, even though we represent only a small portion of the county's population. I suspect that if we could separate them out, our vaccination percentages would be higher than those in the rest of the county.

That said, Okanogan County has seen a recent uptick in its COVID cases. Okanogan County Public Health attributes that to people traveling more, gathering more often than recommended, and not wearing masks. And around the country, we are seeing a terrifying resurgence of the pandemic in states such as Michigan.

The lesson: Stay the course on vaccinations, Okanogan County. It's working.

### The blotter's back

Most features that disappear from newspaper pages don't come back. Over the years, the Methow Valley News has shed some offerings because we had neither the human resources, nor the space, to keep them going as our revenues trended the same direction as the rest of the newspaper industry.

This week, we are reviving a popular feature that many readers have missed: the police blotter of responses to 911 calls. Thanks to the efforts and energy of Managing Editor Natalie Johnson, the blotter returns with its terse summaries of local law enforcement engagements. It's meant to be generally informative, not detailed, but the entries may generate story leads for us as well. Our goal is restore the blotter as a regular offering with news value to our readers.

## Box 97: Letters to the editor

### Check the facts

Dear Editor:

Rep. Newhouse is up to his old tricks. He is continuing the legacy of disinformation and lies perfected by former President Trump. How is he doing this? By painting President Biden's proposed infrastructure package (American Jobs Plan) as a dangerous socialist ploy.

Newhouse says in his weekly column to constituents dated April 6, "... less than 8% of the 'infrastructure package' will go towards our nation's infrastructure." This is inaccurate: 8% of \$2.3 trillion is \$184 billion. There is actually \$621 billion earmarked for transportation (roads, bridges, public transit, rail, ports, waterways, airports and electric vehicles).

He goes on to say, "the Biden Administration wants to raise your taxes to pay for it." That is also inaccurate. There is currently no plan to raise individual taxes. At present, Biden's plan is paid for by increasing the corporate tax rate and making it harder for American corporations to get away with paying zero to little in taxes.

Please, don't just take Rep. Newhouse's word for things. He is only sharing with you what he wants you to see. He is not being a just and fair representative. He can argue against the plan all he wants but he needs to be honest with the facts.

And don't just take my word for things either! In these times, the only way to protect yourself from disinformation is to read the information yourself. Don't fall victim to believing that every social program is radical and socialist just because someone says so. Research a variety of sources, left, right and center, and decide for yourself.

Patti Nordby  
Winthrop



By Len Baublitz

### Don't Forget Loup

Dear Editor,

When I first spotted your editorial (April 7), I looked forward to some publicity (and information) for the organizations that have expended considerable energy towards reaching their respective goals—how those organizations help our community and provide something that is not otherwise provided, and, if not done, how our community would be lacking: the Winthrop library, the Twisp Civic center, and the Okanogan County Fire District 6 new building, all of which are worthwhile enterprises and have strong followings.

But you made no mention of another. The Loup Loup Ski Education Foundation (LLSEF), just one more 501-c-3 nonprofit, has been raising funds to improve their facilities for several years and is well on its way to accomplishing its task. Although it is not strictly a "civic" construction project, the Loup certainly serves our community and will strive to do more with its newer facilities.

Unlike any of the three you mentioned in your editorial, the LLSEF has not received any state, federal or outside grants to accomplish its task, but is close to achieving its goal through local donations. The Loup is part of this community, which includes the Methow, Okanogan and Chelan valleys. The Methow Valley News has been a steady supporter of

the Loup, but I needed to point out this omission as our construction project is major, with all the associated hurdles, as well.

Chris Stern  
Winthrop

### Three digits

Dear Editor:

A Letter to the Editor I Should Not Send:

The letter (April 7) of outrage simmers, perks to a boil of hubris. Was it meant to be published in the April 1 issue?

Dialing 10 digits instead of 7 to order pizza adds three beads to your abacus of indignation. Three.

Consider, for a moment, your suicidal neighbor—hands shaking, eyes watering over

phone pad numbers swimming out of focus—failing to find the 10 digits to live. So much easier with three.

Sam Owen  
Winthrop

## Love in an Arizona border town

BY CASEY RUUD

In Nogales, Arizona, an amazing effort is happening to protect the community by getting its people vaccinated.

On a Thursday in February, my wife, Laura, and I showed up to volunteer for 64 hours (eight 8-hour days each) to earn our vaccine shots. We both expected it to be a boring, drudgery task. And after isolating this past year, we worried it could be potentially unsafe.

Instead, we found a well-oiled machine with health and safety experts working feverishly, supported by over 100 volunteers, to pull off this critical battle against COVID-19. Every person was performing as though this was a race against time—which it is.

Nogales, in Santa Cruz County, is a border town with Mexico and made up of almost all Hispanic folks. Many families are multi-generational and hit hard by COVID-19. The county was offering vaccines to those 75 and older and essential workers in the town's recreation center.

My first job was as a parking flagger and greeter. As cars pulled in to park, drivers rolled down their car window so I could check they had an appointment and ask if they needed handicapped parking. One man in his 30s told me a heart-wrenching story.

He said his mother and father both got the "rona," became very sick, and were hospitalized. They were isolated. No one in the family could see them. His mother died alone. His father eventually fought off the horrible impact to his lungs. His dad was in our COVID vaccine center getting his first shot as his son shared his story with me. He was so sad that no one in the family could be with his mother as she passed. I knew in that moment I was part of a team trying to save lives.

### Saving the stickies

After receiving shots in a makeshift area on one side of the gym, a volunteer hands them off with a yellow or pink sticky with a time written on it, to a team of nurses and paramedics to guide them to a seat in the end of the gym to wait the required 15 minutes (or 30 minutes if they are allergic to certain medications).

This section is run by three school nurses. Once a person is seated, the nurse puts the sticky on the back of their chair. After the nurse verifies the person or couple does not have a reaction to the shot and their waiting period is over, the vaccinated people can leave. The nurse then moves the sticky from the back of the chair to the seat so the sanitation team knows which chairs to clean.

My job, when assigned to this section, was to wipe down each seat with a paper towel soaked in a quaternary solution that kills the virus. I treated each chair as though it was smothered with virus. The motto here was we wanted no chance for the "rona" to get a foothold and spread its evil self.

I collected the stickies for several days and ended up with hundreds, each with a time written on it. To me, each one of the stickies represents one or two lives saved from COVID-19. Due to privacy laws, names and photos of people getting vaccinated cannot be shared, but these simple little stickies tell the story of real people fighting alongside their neighbors to live another day. This vaccination center saved 500 to 600 people a day.

The management team led by Ray and Marilyn works tirelessly to put a team together that changes every day and is constantly improving. My wife and I were rewarded by earning our vaccine shots. But way more than that we were given the gift of being, for 64 hours, wit-



Photo Courtesy of Casey Ruud  
Casey Ruud collected hundreds of "stickies" during his stint as a vaccination volunteer in Arizona, each representing a person who was vaccinated.

ness to and part of the solution to this pandemic that has been killing so many in our communities.

After a year of isolation, and news filled with fear and anger, our spirits were dragging for sure. This experience has rejuvenated our faith in humanity. We gained a sense of purpose that was desperately missing for us this past year. Never would I have thought we would find so much love in an Arizona border town in the middle of a pandemic. The gift of giving still works.

Casey and Laura Ruud moved to the Methow Valley 20 years ago. Last known jobs were owners at the Old Schoolhouse Brewery, where many beers were served. They now spend winters in Tucson, Arizona, playing and making Native American style flutes, bike riding and hiking.

## Methow Valley News

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Front page banner photo by Marcy Stamper

## Harts Pass



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# Opinion

## NO BAD DAYS

### Owning it

Before and during the past weekend, I put a lot of miles on the old Pathfinder (nicknamed the “Factfinder” years ago) delivering bundles of our Methow Home and Methow Valley Summer 2021 magazines from one end of the valley to the other. Despite our best efforts, COVID considerations and unforeseen logistical obstacles made it difficult to get the magazines out sooner. Is it just me, or do many formerly routine things seem just a little harder these days?



Don Nelson

My goal, not entirely achieved, was to have widespread distribution of the magazines by Memorial Day weekend. There are about 90 stops on our delivery lists for the maga-

zines, so if I didn't get to you, my apologies and please let me know. We will try to respond promptly.

If I had just been quickly dumping bundles like a newspaper delivery boy in a hurry, the effort would have seemed more like a dreary but necessary chore: Stop the truck, get bundles out of the truck, drop them off, get back in the truck and keep driving to the next place.

Instead, I ended up in spontaneous conversations at many of the places I stopped. Some were with people I've known for years but haven't seen face-to-face for months, others were less known but nonetheless friendly and thankful for my efforts. So the task took longer than expected, but it was worth it. It was good to chat with people, ask how things were going and glean a few morsels of what might turn out to be useful information. I was grateful that they took the time for a conversation.

After a day or so of schlepping bundles, it occurred to me that many of the people I talked to were the owners of the valley's mostly-small businesses — the bosses, as it were. And I noticed something that won't surprise many Methow residents: the boss can and likely will end up doing anything that needs to be done.

That's a fact of life for the valley's independent business owners, and I'm one of them. I believe no job at the newspaper that needs doing is beneath my dignity, and I don't ask employees to do something I wouldn't do (although I do ask them to do things I *can't* do, like bookkeeping and newspaper design).

Hence, I'm the delivery guy when delivery is called for. That doesn't make me special. I've always admired Hank Konrad for his consistent presence in and attention to his grocery store. Hank stocks shelves, helps customers, bags groceries — whatever needs to be done, he does it.

On my rounds last week, I stopped at Bart Bradshaw's accounting office in Winthrop to drop off some magazines, and there was Bart in the parking lot with a leaf blower, cleaning things up. He told me he also helps out at Pardon's Mini Mart, which he owns, when the crush of business makes it necessary (which often involves wrangling all the vehicles that are lined up for gasoline on a busy day).

At the AbbyCreek Inn, owner Josh Buehler was in the front office when I stopped by. Have you even been in the Mazama Store when there wasn't at least one of the LeDuc clan working the counters? At North Cascades Lumber, owner Nick Allgood and his one employee, Jon Nelson, were handling the business. The Wine Shed's Dave Swenson greeted me from behind the counter, as he always does. Those are just a few examples. Full involvement is the norm for the typical Methow Valley business owner. Just ask any of them.

Because I inquired, several owners also confirmed how difficult it has been to find enough employees this year, even more so than in the past. With what looks like another booming tourism season upon us, the prolonged lack of enough help will undoubtedly take a toll on business owners who are scrambling to keep up.

That said, I heard a consistent sense of commitment to keeping the valley vibrant and welcoming. It's a challenge we all took on, knowing what it might demand of us.

If Memorial Day weekend was an indicator, we are in for another deluge of visitors. I tried a couple of times to make deliveries in downtown Winthrop but had trouble finding anyplace to park. The eastbound and westbound queues from the four-way stop were monumental (someone posted on Facebook that the Memorial Day westbound backup on Highway 20 went all the way to the post office). It looks like nomadic camping will be a thing again. And the next “shoulder season” is months away. But hard work is better than no work. Every business owner in the valley understands that.

**CORRECTION:** An article about COVID infections in the May 26 issue misstated the time period covered. The county recorded 41 cases in the week ending May 24, not May 17. The News regrets the error.

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Front page banner photo by Steve Mitchell

## Box 97: Letters to the editor

### Thanks from Jamie's Place

Dear Editor:

Thank you so much to the volunteers that showed up to the Jamie's Place Garden Party, as well as those that donated. A special thanks to Hank at Hank's Harvest Foods, the Do It Center, Ace Hardware, and Wild Hearts Nursery, and those individuals who donated time, sweat, thoughts and plants. What a productive, fun time! It was wonderful to create a beautiful space after such a tough year.

Jessica Kulsrud

Associate Director, Jamie's Place

### Checking the restrooms

Dear Editor:

This is in response to the ongoing toilet dilemma in Twisp. I am viewing this from both sides. I understand The Merc's concern over the safety of the public restrooms there. I understand that the police can only check on it so many times, as they have many other duties.

I offer a solution. Whenever someone goes into town, and if they have the time, check on the restrooms and report any suspicious activity. Some would say this is spying on your fellow citizens. However, this is to help law enforcement and also The Merc. Use the buddy system if you are concerned about your own safety.

We need to help each other out here, as our community usually does. If the bathrooms are open, I intend to check on them when I come to town, which is about once a week.

Also, is there outside video surveillance? I thought there was at one time. This problem needs to be solved.

If the people using the restroom for ill purposes realize how much it is being checked, this may deter them. Let's do it.

Pearl Cherrington

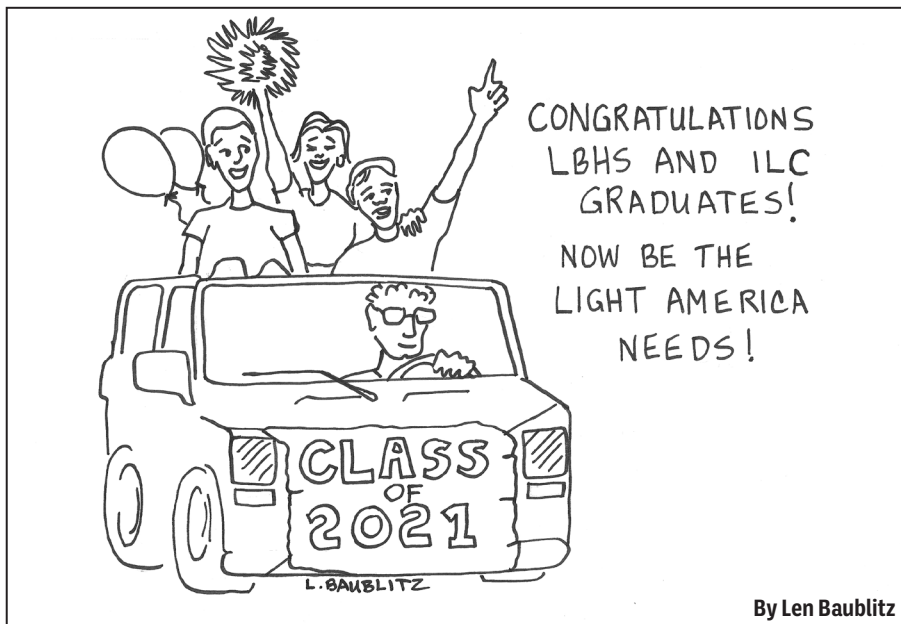
Twisp

### Gratitude for community's care

Dear Editor:

To our dear community and beyond, Ari, Chloe and I want to extend a heartfelt and sweeping thank you. Four weeks ago we received the call that everyone fears most, the sudden death of a family member, our beloved Papa Joe. The pain of such a loss is beyond words, but so is the gratitude for the support that has flooded our lives since that moment.

During this month we have received: nourishment from everyone bringing us amazing meals, a nimble and constant response to the ever-changing landscape of our needs, amazing understanding and support from Deirdre and the board of Methow At Home, generous financial support, a deluge of beautiful cards with heartwarming messages of love, an incredible participation in Joe's celebration of life, hundreds of loving hugs, thoughtful gifts, counseling, healing work, prayers, legal counsel and more than I even know. This culture of caring in



By Len Baublitz

the Methow is something extraordinary. Our family experienced a similar outpouring 14 years ago, when Joe went through kidney failure and his transplant, and now tragically once again. I am humbled and inspired to continue to pay the kindness forward.

We have learned more than we want about losing someone suddenly and the power of being able to lay a loved one to rest with beauty and presence. A huge thank you to Eddy over at Precht-Harrison-Nearants, who supported us to bring in our own casket built, painted and filled with love by Joe's friends and family. We were able to sing, cry and dance Joe to rest. The hole in our lives and hearts will forever be there, but we gain strength from the grace of everyone's love. Thank from the bottom of our hearts.

Tracy, Ari and Chloe Sprauer

Twisp

### Understanding our history

Dear Editor:

This Memorial Day I am moved to comment on the misplaced fear by many states that want to quite literally whitewash our history. People can hold complex thoughts, and are able to understand that while the founding principles of our nation are indeed an inspiring step forward in justice for the common person, those sentiments were a product of their time.

The first voters in our fledgling democracy were white men, and not even every white man but only those who owned land. Men without property, women, Native Americans, and people of color were excluded from the democratic experiment. Do you know of the origins of the KKK? About the 1921 Tulsa Massacre? The forced abduction of Native children from their families to be sent to “residential schools” where their heritage was obliterated? The 1917 beating of women suffragettes marching peacefully for the right to vote?

I love our country and want us to fully realize the ideals so beautifully stated in our Constitution. If we neglect educating ourselves about the struggles for democracy we will never understand the issues that are so urgent today. I am thankful for those who have given their lives for our country, and that includes those who have lived and died for justice.

Sandy Vaughn

Oroville

## MY TURN

### The federally approved wildlife slaughter you pay for

BY SAM LUCY

Some irony within the pages of last week's paper. You printed two informative features on “varmints” (beaver and fishers) as well as a darker piece by Ted Williams on wildlife killing contests. Planned irony or not, I found it powerful reporting. Thank you.

Many taxpayers realize they (we) already pay exorbitant subsidies on commodity farming, ranching, logging, gas and oil drilling. This has been true for several decades, almost a century now for farming. However, what some taxpayers may not realize is that not only do we subsidize the study, recovery and reintroduction of many endangered species, if successful (wolves come to mind), we then get to pay again to have them slaughtered.

In his excellent piece, Ted Williams mentions Wildlife Services. Wildlife Services is a federal agency whose catchy name may lead one to assume it supports our national Wildlife. Nothing could be further from the truth. Wildlife Services annually receives \$100 million of your money to trap, poison and snipe — many times from aircraft — a menagerie of

native mammals.

I've read that between the years of 2000-14, 2 million native mammals were destroyed by this agency. Several of these animals are listed as endangered or threatened. In 2014 alone, Wildlife Services killed more than 60,000 coyotes, close to 3,000 foxes, almost 800 bobcats, hundreds of black bears, and over 300 wolves. Although there wasn't any record of Wildlife Services killing fishers, they killed tens of thousands of beavers. Cougars, too, of course.

#### Other deaths

As well, each year Wildlife Services is responsible for the killing of other species whether intentionally or not. Through “fall-out” poisoning/trapping, many domestic dogs, cats and other pets have been killed. On rare occasions, the unintended poisoning of human beings has also been documented.

All of this occurs, then and now, on your land. Why? In large part so that in the West, cattle ranchers may “safely” continue to raise 4% of the nation's beef.

The farmer in me wants to cry. The hunter in me wants to puke. The writer in me, well, I

guess just can't in good conscience leave this one alone.

When I read about these “killing contests” I cringe. What's worse is knowing a portion of my tax helps support this sort of activity. As noted by Williams, many other hunters and hunting groups also oppose these ill-intended killings. I stumble over the “fair chase” thing that some hunters mention (after all, we have the guns and the wildlife don't!), yet I get the sentiment which I believe is one of respect and full reverence for wildlife. All wildlife.

Many folks from many walks of life study and appreciate the wild world. Few, I will risk suggesting, do so any more astutely or more patiently than true hunters who in many cases, were the nation's first conservationists. And conservation has been and will continue to be about balance and habitat, never predator control.

We can spin things any way that might suit us best at the moment yet, in the end, Nature always bats last. Always.

*Sam Lucy lives in Winthrop. He is co-owner of Bluebird Grain Farms and is a poet and author.*

## Contact your U.S. representatives

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# Opinion

## NO BAD DAYS

### Checking the checkers

A few weeks ago, I spoke by Zoom to a journalism class at Lakeside School in Seattle. The class is taught by a longtime friend who “imports” working journalists to talk about their real-world experiences.



Don Nelson

Before the online gathering, the students submitted a list of excellent questions to help jump-start the discussion, including one I didn’t get to during a 45-minute session: whether we have “fact checkers” for our Methow Valley News stories.

Many large publications, particularly magazines, have fact-checkers who meticulously comb through stories to verify even the tiniest details. For articles that

may run to tens of thousands of words, that is a lot of research. Meanwhile, the writers wait to hear what they need to explain or defend.

Newspapers haven’t historically had fact checkers per se. Typically, that task was handled first by an editor or editors who flagged anything that raised a question of authenticity or accuracy. The vetted and usually rewritten articles then moved on to the copy desk — the green eyeshade people who policed grammar, punctuation, spelling and internal consistency. They also knew a lot about local history, issues, institutions and personalities, and could be maddeningly imperious when it came to bracing reporters about where they got their information.

The copy desk was the last safeguard against mistakes large and small, and could unilaterally prevent stories from being printed. Writers both feared and utterly relied on copy editors’ expertise.

The copy editor is a vanishing breed. Brutal budget cutting has reduced copy desks to shadowy vestiges, and the job now usually involves newspaper design as well. The lack of editing shows, and readers notice. Worse, large newspaper chains have centralized copy editing and design functions at locations that may be thousands of miles from where the newspaper is published. Local knowledge is gone. Readers notice that as well.

At a small publication like the Methow Valley News, the editing process is compressed. Either I or Managing Editor Natalie Johnson read the stories submitted by staff or freelancers for content, structure, comprehension and factualness. And that’s it, until the stories are “proofed” on the pages before they are OKed for the printer. The proofreaders are also me and Natalie — the same eyes reviewing the same stories but in a different format (print versus on screen), which is helpful but not ideal. We used to employ proofreaders but our own necessary budget cutting has made that no longer feasible.

So the long answer to the fact checker question is, no we do not. We — the reporters and editors — are our own fact-checkers. The prime directive for reporters is to get it right in the first place. We catch a lot of things in our editing process. But inevitably, errors get past us — we are human, and working under intense deadline pressure. No publication, no matter how well-checked, is immune to mistakes. We hate getting things wrong, knowing that some readers will think we’re just stupid or careless. Sometimes it’s not our fault. Sources give us wrong information — not deliberately or misleadingly — more often than you’d think.

I thought of the Lakeside student’s question a few days later when I came across an industry article about a nationwide survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, posing the question: What makes a news story trustworthy?

Here’s the major takeaway, as summarized in the Pew article: “Overall, broad majorities of U.S. adults say it is at least somewhat important to consider each of five surveyed factors when determining whether a news story is trustworthy or not: the news organization that publishes it (88%); the sources cited in it (86%); their gut instinct about it (77%); the person, if any, who shared it with them (68%); and the specific journalist who reported it (66%). Just 24% of adults say it’s at least somewhat important to consider a sixth factor included in the survey: whether the story has a lot of shares, comments or likes on social media.”

So: The publication matters, the sources matter, the writer matters. I have a feeling that the “gut instinct” factor is related directly to those other three. We work hard at being trustworthy. If your gut tells you we are, we’re doing our job.

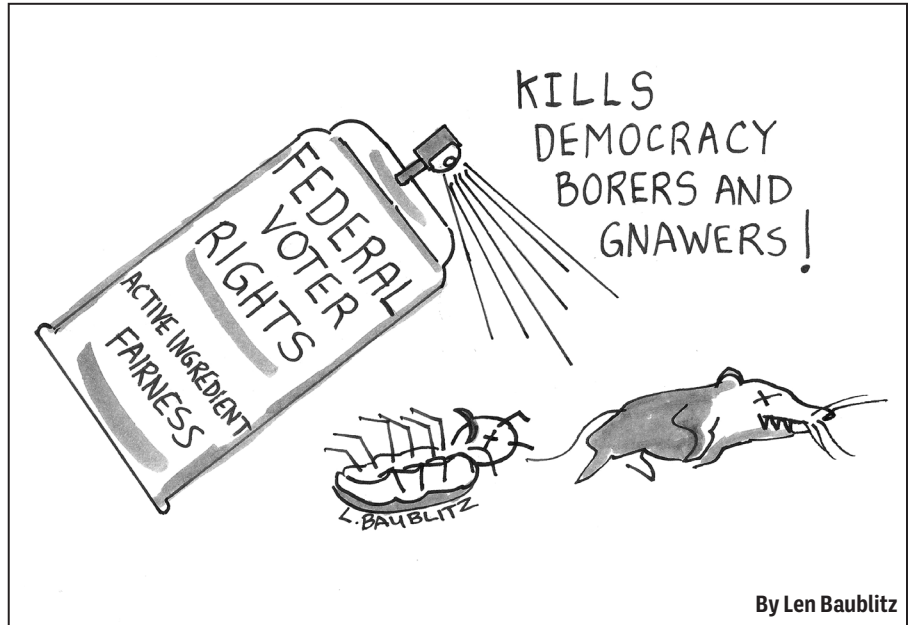
Speaking of mistakes: I told you I’m a terrible typist. In last week’s column, I made an error in the very first sentence, which is painfully ironic because it was about a typing exercise. The goof was pointed out to me by two experienced journalists who have a keen eye for such things. I think I’m going to hide under my desk until I feel better.

## Box 97: Letters to the editor

EXERCISE YOUR FREEDOM.

Letters must be fewer than 350 words and may be edited for libel, grammar and taste.

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By Len Baublitz

## WRITERS ON THE RANGE

### What do we owe wildland firefighters?

BY JONATHON GOLDEN

“It’s like having gasoline out there,” said Brian Steinhardt, forest fire zone manager for Prescott and Coconino national forests in Arizona, in a recent AP story about the increasingly fire-prone West.

Now something else is happening — and at the worst possible time.

Federal firefighters are leaving the work force and taking their training and experience with them. The inability of federal agencies to offer competitive pay and benefits is creating hundreds of wildland firefighting vacancies.

Vacancies, of course, limit how much federal firefighters can do. If Western communities want to be protected, they need to ensure that their firefighters receive better pay and benefits.

In my 11 years of work as a wildland firefighter, I’ve managed aircraft, trained people and run fires myself, but I also did outreach and recruitment for the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. I know how hard it is for hiring managers to make 2,000 hours of grueling work, crammed into six exhausting months, sound appealing when the pay is \$13.45/hour. The pay doesn’t come close to matching the true demands or everyday dangers of the job.

Federal wildland firefighters, by necessity, are transient workers. During the fire season — now nearly year-round — they must be available to travel anywhere in the United States at any time. And to advance in their career, they have to move to other federal duty stations to gain more qualifications.

Finding affordable housing has always been a problem for career firefighters on a federal salary. To make matters worse, federal agencies revoked the “Transfer of Station” stipend for career employees, which helped offset the cost of moving. Just recently, a national forest supervisor also revoked a “boot stipend.” It might sound minor, but it isn’t: When you’re in the firefighting business, boots tough enough to save your life can easily cost you \$500.

#### Not waiting

Some states aren’t relying on the government to act quickly. “We aren’t just waiting for the next crisis to hit,” said California Gov. Gavin Newsom, in establishing an \$80.74 million Emergency Fund that delivers an additional 1,256 seasonal firefighters to boost CALFIRE’s ranks. This Emergency Fund is in addition to the governor’s \$1 billion budget request for California’s Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan.

In Washington, state legislators unanimously passed a \$125 million package that will enable the state’s Department of Natural Resources to hire 100 more firefighters. The legislation furthers the state’s efforts to restore forest health and creates a \$25 million fund to ensure community preparedness around the state.



Photo courtesy of Jonathan Golden

Jonathan Golden, a former wildland firefighter, says that other firefighters in the West are leaving the work force because of low pay that doesn’t match the job’s demands.

Utah’s House Bill 65, recently signed into law, appropriates money to help Utah’s communities offset the cost of wildfire suppression. Most importantly, it commissions a study to evaluate the current pay plan for firefighters within Utah’s Natural Resources Department.

The bill’s sponsor, Rep. Casey Snider, was amazed to learn that frontline wildland firefighters make more money at McDonald’s: “These positions are critical,” he said. “They are the first ones on fires.” This year, Utah has already had five times the number of wildfires it normally experiences in a year.

#### Speaking up

And firefighters are organizing and speaking up. The Grassroots Wildland Firefighters group is working to halt the exodus of firefighters from federal agencies by advocating for pay parity with state and local fire protection agencies. The group also supports initiatives to assist the physical and mental health of firefighters and their families. The statistics they highlight are shocking: Wildland firefighters have a suicide rate 30 times higher than the average. They also experience high incidences of cardiovas-

cular disease and lung cancer.

There is talk on the federal level of creating a permanent, year-round firefighting work force. I think this is a necessary step, but it won’t fix the work force capacity issue unless increased pay and benefits are used to encourage the recruitment and retention of federal firefighters.

We all know that today’s wildfires are longer, more damaging and more frequent than ever before. We also know that men and women are putting their lives on the line for less than they’d earn at a McDonald’s.

Our firefighters do all this to protect our lives, our forests and our communities. We owe them at least a living wage and a chance for a healthy life. I hope more states and legislators will start paying attention. This is a debt that needs to be paid.

Jonathon Golden lives in Moab, Utah, and is a contributor to *Writers on the Range*, [writersontherange.org](http://writersontherange.org), a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He left firefighting in 2019 to found a consulting company that focuses on conservation and national security.

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## Harts Pass

By Erik Brooks



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