

Rural Health Care Crisis - Single-payer National Health Care is the only solution

— by *Chris Perry, Oregon Rural Action Director*

America's health care system is the subject of much polarizing debate. At one end you have those who argue that Americans have the best health care system in the world. At the other end you have the ever-mounting accumulation of evidence that American health insurance companies are systematically cheating the American public. Proponents of the status-quo have been effective in using McCarthyism-era tactics of painting those who call for reform Socialists and repeating the decades-old mantra of taxation fears that never withstand any deep scrutiny. Looking beyond the rhetoric, what is the present state of American health care and how does it stack-up against the rest of the developed world and to what degree has the current health care crises impacted events taking place here in Rural Oregon and throughout Rural America.

The American health care system is outrageously expensive, yet inadequate. Despite spending more than twice as much as the rest of the industrialized nations (\$7,259 per capita), the United States performs poorly in comparison on all major health indicators such as life expectancy (rank 23rd) and infant mortality (rank 27th). In spite of the United States spending 15.6% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on health care, 47 million Americans are uninsured and another 38 million Americans are under-insured in that they have individual annual deductibles of over \$2,500 per year. In short, nearly one-third of America has inadequate or no health insurance. Nationally, 80% of the uninsured are members of working families as the number of employers who offer health insurance has decreased by 16% since the year 2000, resulting in the fact that today only 58% of all US employers offer health benefits. On average, all other advanced nations spend less than 8% of their GDP on health care, yet provide comprehensive coverage to their entire populations. (Physicians for National Health Program—PNHP)

Health care premiums have risen 66% from 2000 to 2006 and during that same period, an average of 18,000 Americans died each year due to lack of access to health care. Hospital costs have risen 10% a year and now consume one-third of total health care costs and the bloated administrative overhead of private health insurance companies consumes an additional one-third. According to the National Coalition on Health Care, the percentage of Americans whose family-level out-of-pocket expenses for health care (including health insurance) exceeds \$2,000 a year rose from 37.3% in 1996 to 48.1% in 2004. The average employee contribution to company provided health insurance has increased more than 143% since the year 2000. Rising health care costs have reduced our economic competitiveness within the international marketplace for firms that do provide health care coverage, which has led to the loss of many American jobs. For example, all things being equal, Toyota closed down three US auto-production plants due to the fact that they could pay the same salaries (adjusted for currency exchange rates) to workers across the border in Canada and still make the average car or truck for \$2,800 less than what it cost to manufacture in the US. Uncontrolled high costs and pressure by insurance companies to reduce or eliminate payments for preventative diagnostic testing and the facts cited above have much to do with a recent 2005 United Nations study that ranked US health care just 37th in the world. We do manage to rank first by a landslide in lack of access and in the number of accidental deaths from the result of pharmaceuticals, over 100,000 per year, as bureaucracy has undermined safety and efficiency.

The social and economic stress inflicted upon Rural America is even more pronounced and far-reaching. In Oregon rural counties lying east of the Cascade Mountains, the national health care crisis has become the origin for many of the economic ailments that our communities suffer. Whereas in the state of Oregon, 60% of employers provide health insurance, in rural Oregon less than 40% of employers can afford to offer benefits, thereby leaving one in two rural Oregonians under the age of 65 without any health insurance coverage. (Health Care for All Oregon—HCAO) The heavy economic burdens imposed by lack of health care result in the fact that every 30 seconds in the United States, someone files for bankruptcy in the aftermath of a serious health problem. A recent study done by the Rural Policy Institute on the impact of health care costs found that many family farms and ranches often have to sell off a portion of their land, as it is often the only significant asset they have, as part of a bankruptcy court order settlement in order to save their actual residential home site and also often times to avoid foreclosure. Today in Oregon, one in three bankruptcies and one in five foreclosures result from the loss of savings and burdensome debt incurred due to out-of-pocket health care costs and those numbers go higher in direct coloration to the lower population densities of rural Oregon counties. In fact, many studies now show that rising health care costs and health care concerns rank above the fears of crop failure among family farmers. Rural Oregon communities are becoming significantly older as the 25-40 year old population age group continues to shrink not only because of a lack of living wage jobs, but also due to a lack of health care benefits available to young families as the cost of providing such is often prohibitive to the many small rural-sector employers. The average age of the counties in which the majority of Oregon Rural Action members reside (Union, Baker,



(Continued on page 2)



(Continued from page 1)

Malheur, Umatilla, Grant and Wallowa counties) is 39.6 years old, five years above the State of Oregon average age, as more of our young people flock to urban centers in pursuit of living wages and adequate health care coverage for their families. Oregon is home to more family-owned farms and ranches than any other state in the country, yet the average age of these farmers is 57-years old. The costs, risks and market challenges associated with farming and ranching are increasingly compounded by the additional costs and stress placed on the self-employed by the private health insurance industry, thereby significantly reducing the prospects of the next generation succeeding in maintaining a healthy number of family-owned and operated farms and ranches. Lack of rural health care has become one of the leading contributors to the fundamental demographic and environmental changes taking place within our rural Oregon communities resulting in aging populations, decreasing public school enrollments and school funding and the negative and unsustainable ecological conditions brought on by the further consolidation and industrialization of our local and national agricultural systems.

Oregon has taken modest steps at the state level in trying to remedy the uninsured gap with the Oregon Health Plan enacted in 1996. At its peak in 2001, just over 105,000 Oregonians were able to secure low or no-cost health care coverage in which nearly half of the recipients resided in rural Oregon. However, due to budget cuts and a state legislature hostile towards expanded health care coverage, the Oregon Health Plan only covered 44,000 people in 2006 and more medical costs and needs are now denied or no longer covered. Whereas the intentions of the Oregon Health Plan were good, it was never going to be anything more than a band-aid approach to the problem as it never tackled the root cause of what undermines our system. In 2007, the Oregon Legislature passed Senate Bill 329 by a razor-thin margin and created the Oregon Health Trust and the Oregon Health Fund Board. Oregon Rural Action signed-on as a co-sponsor of that bill and a couple members of our communities sent gut-wrenching personal and family stories to the state Legislature of how the lack of adequate rural health care has claimed the life of a loved one and/or drained ones life savings. Health care advocates around the state have reservations as to the ultimate make-up and effectiveness of this entity, but it has the potential to take transitional steps towards more comprehensive reform on the state level. The finalized health care reform plan will be presented to the 2009 Oregon State Legislature, which more than likely will choose to refer it to the voters rather than drum-up the collective political will to fundamentally reform our broken health care system.

The root cause of our high-cost, poor-care health system lies within the virtual stranglehold of the \$776 billion dollar a year American private health insurance industry. The private health insurance industry is not big because it relentlessly seeks out new customers. Unlike any other industry, this one grows by rejecting customers while at the same time charging American employers over \$10,880 per year on average to insure a family of four. Our costly and bloated system reeks of inefficiency as it employs more than 300,000 people just to turn down claims in this on-going war between doctors and patients versus insurers. Private insurance companies and the influence and power they wield within the political arena are the roadblocks towards having America joining all other industrialized countries around the world in offering health care as a basic human right. Private insurance companies are motivated by profiteering schemes in which they simply externalize the human costs and socio-economic stress by systematically delaying, diminishing, and denying payment for promised services and blaming individuals for their own misfortune.

Who controls our nation's health care purse strings and manipulates the political spectrum to such a degree that all but a small minority of our elected officials capitulate at every attempt at reform? The small number may surprise you, as the board of directors of the nine largest insurance companies consist of just 113 individuals. These directors are some of the richest in the world, a veritable whose-who of the annual Forbes 500. They hold 150 past and/or present positions within the major financial and investment institutions in America as the combined affiliations among the 113 health insurance directors represents revenue of over \$2.5 Trillion dollars in 2006 (Source Watch). As the line between government and corporations has been blurred, the influence and intimidation that these individuals exert dominates US health care policy and squashes all meaningful attempts at reform, such as House Resolution 676 (HR 676), which would institute a single-payer National Health Care system. To date, only 86 out of our 435 Congressional Representatives have signed on as co-sponsors. Sadly, not a single member of the Oregon Congressional delegation has signed on as a co-sponsor to HR 676. Millions of dollars of industry profits are used to propagandize the American public and influence voters through the aforementioned scare tactics of "socialized medicine" and long delays and rationing of service that supposedly occur in the single-payer system.

Speaking of rationing, in America we see the ultimate form of rationing in the industry-wide collusion of inadequate access, denial of care, bankruptcy and foreclosure and premature death. Speaking of "socialized medicine", in which defenders of the status-quo perpetually sound the alarm against medicine financed by the public, we are already 60% there. Yes, the fact is that currently 60% of our health care system is financed by public money: federal and state taxes, property taxes and tax subsidies. These funds pay for Medicare, Medicaid, the VA, health care coverage for public employees (including teachers, firefighters, police, etc.), elected officials, military personnel, etc. There are also hefty tax subsidies to employers to help pay for their employees health insurance. About 20% of our health care system is financed by all of us individually through out-of-pocket payments, co-pays, deductibles, the uninsured paying directly for care, and people paying privately for premiums. Private employers only pay 20% of our health care system costs. (Physicians for National Health Program and the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office).

Oregon Rural Action

The Furrow is published four times each year by Oregon Rural Action. Oregon Rural Action supports and encourages community organizing around locally identified issues. Our members work together to promote healthy and sustainable rural communities and to ensure that all people have a voice in the decisions, policies, and systems that affect their lives.

Board of Directors

Cori Brewster, Nancy Gledhill, Randy Joseph, Chuck Koch, Ramon Lara, Rich Minogue

Local Chapters

Baker County Chapter

Blue Mountain Chapter

Snake River Chapter

Staff

Chris Perry, Executive Director/Lead Organizer

Karen Wagner, Statewide Farmers' Market Promotion

Contact us at 541-975-2411; Web: www.oraction.org

(Continued on Page 3)



(Continued from page 2)

In all, it is a very regressive way to finance health care in that the poor and middle class pay a much higher percentage of their income for health care than higher income individuals do. Of course, the way in which we presently finance our Nation's health care system does not factor in the socio-economic losses and the litany of personal, family and community tragedies that become more commonplace with each passing day.

There is only one single cure for what ails so many of us and what will certainly afflict many more of us; we must have a single-payer National Health Care System. Single-payer financing is the only way to recapture the billions of dollars wasted each year by private insurers on things that having nothing to do with health care: overhead, underwriting, billing, sales and marketing departments as well as obscene profits and exorbitant CEO and executive pay. The savings on paperwork alone, more than \$350 billion a year, is enough to provide comprehensive coverage to all Americans without paying more than we already do.

Under a single-payer system, all Americans would be covered for all medically necessary services including: doctor visits, hospital stays, long-term care, dental, vision, prescription drug, preventative check-ups and medical supply costs. Patients would regain free choice of doctor and hospital and doctors would regain autonomy over patient care. Physicians would be paid fee-for-service according to a negotiated formulary or receive a salary from a hospital on non-profit HMO/group practice. Hospitals would receive a universal budget of operating expenses and a short-term buy-out would occur to payoff for-profit hospital shareholders.

A single-payer National Health Care System would be financed by eliminating private insurers and recapturing their administrative waste. One-third of all health care dollars go towards administrative costs, more than double what the next highest industrialized nation (Canada) pays and almost triple the 12.7% average that the rest of the industrialized world pays in health care administrative costs. In addition, a universal public health care system would be financed this way: public financing of Medicare and Medicaid would remain the same and the difference or gap between current public financing and what we need for universal coverage would be by a payroll tax on employers of 6% and an income tax on individuals of 2%. The income tax would take the place of all current insurance premiums, deductibles, co-pays, and any other out-of-pocket payments. The 2% income tax would be less than what over 95% of the US population now pays for all premiums and costs, in particular anyone who has a pre-existing condition or has had a serious illness in the family. The employer payroll tax would be more costly to a business who does not offer any health care coverage to their workers. However, it will be much less than what they would pay for good private insurance for themselves as business owners and their workers. For the vast majority of small businesses already providing coverage, the payroll tax will be significantly less expensive than what they are paying now. This employer payroll tax would help the rural sector much more than the urban sector in that small rural-based business, the self-employed and family farms and ranches would receive health insurance for the same low rate as larger firms as many small employers currently have to pay 25% or more of payroll expenses for health insurance (National Coalition on Health Care). In essence, the overwhelming majority of workers and employers would receive a National pay raise created by a more efficient and universally accessible health care system. More rural communities would have the potential the thrive with its citizens freed from the shackles of the for-profit health insurance industry.

Obviously, this upcoming 2008 election year is of profound importance on many levels. A candidates approach to health care reform is the single most important position with regard to having the potential to reverse and fundamentally change the socio-economic burdens set in place by private insurers that have dramatically altered and diminished the American middle-class. The platforms of all the major Presidential candidates of each party are summarized as follows: Republicans universally denounce "government-run" health care while ignoring the fact that public dollars already support health insurance at every turn and offer ideas of questionable value, such as medical malpractice reform and tax credits for those who buy their own private health insurance. A 2004 report by the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office found that malpractice costs account for less than two percent of health care spending. The appealing rhetoric of tax credits does not address how low-income and middle-class families would come up with the cash up front to pay for adequate coverage. Preservation of the status-quo is the health care mission of the Republican platform in which the nearly one-third of Americans who are uninsured or under-insured do not benefit without fundamental change.

Democrats generally take the better approach to reform as their proposals include expanding Medicare, now restricted to those 65 and older, to cover more people. Or they would allow Americans to buy into a new public program or sign up for the same plan that members of Congress enjoy. Some mandate that all Americans buy health insurance, but serious reservations need to be considered if the government forces people to purchase insurance, it must insure the coverage it makes people buy is adequate. Any plan that would push people into the private sector moves the country in the wrong direction. In that scenario, industry wins again and people lose and suffer the consequences. With the exception of Dennis Kucinich, no other Presidential Candidate's proposal addresses the critical need to abolish the private health insurance industry. Americans have a choice. We can continue with a high-cost, unregulated, profit-driven private insurance system leaving millions to languish without care, and millions more to face the frustrations of systematic delays, diminished care and denial of benefits. Alternatively, we can build a more efficient common pool health care system that provides necessary and adequate care to everyone for less that what we are paying now. A single-payer National Health Care System is the only viable solution to remedy the root-cause of what is fundamentally a broken system.



Corporate Watch

Corporate Personhood - Pierce the Corporate Veil

What is Corporate Personhood? I didn't know myself until five years ago when I read the People's History of the Supreme Court by Peter Irons. Our Bill of Rights was the result of tremendous efforts to institutionalize and protect the rights of human beings. It strengthened the premise of our Constitution in that the people are the root of all power and authority for government. This vision has made our Constitution and government a model emulated in many nations. But corporate lawyers (acting as both attorneys and judges) subverted our Bill of Rights in the late 1880's by establishing the doctrine of "corporate personhood" -- the claim that corporations were intended to fully enjoy the legal status and protections created for human beings.

Corporations are not persons and possess only the privileges we the people willfully grant them. Granting corporations the status of legal "persons" effectively rewrites the Constitution to serve corporate interests as though they were human interests. Ultimately, the doctrine of granting constitutional rights to corporations gives a thing illegitimate privilege and power that undermines our freedom and authority as citizens. While corporations are setting the agenda on issues in our Congress and courts, we the people are not; for we can never speak as loudly with our own voices as corporations can.

Before 1886, corporations were limited for specific purposes; limited periods of time; could not own other corporations; accounting was public record; investors and owners were liable for all their decisions and actions. Then in 1886, a highly questionable U.S. Supreme Court decision (*Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad*) began a process of granting constitutional rights to corporations as if they were living persons. In 1889, Corporate Personhood was set as ever-lasting precedent by the US Supreme Court in the *City of Minneapolis v. St. Louis Railroad* case, in which the court ruled that a corporation is a "person" for both equal protection and due process. These two watershed US Supreme Court rulings set the precedent cited from then forward that a private corporation was a "natural person". This question of "corporate personhood" has been used and built upon ever since to strike down hundreds of local, state and federal laws enacted to protect people from corporate harm and environmental destruction.

With their rights as persons combined with vastly greater financial and legal resources, corporations now exert much more influence than living people on legislation and court rulings. Under current U.S. law, corporations are persons, just like you and me. In the past 100 years they've acquired many rights that were designed for people, including 1st Amendment free speech rights; 4th Amendment protection against search and seizure; 5th Amendment protection against self-incrimination; 14th Amendment guarantees of equal protection and due process (African Americans males awarded citizenship status). Of all the 14th Amendment cases brought before the Supreme Court from 1890 through 1920, 388 cases brought forward dealt with corporations seeking the protection of the 14th Amendment. During that same time the court made rulings on just 19 cases of individual African Americans seeking 14th Amendment Constitutional rights and protection. Since large corporations have considerably more resources - both financial and legal - than almost any individual, they are able today to act like governments: Energy corporations determine our energy policies; automobile corporations determine our nation's transportation policies; corporate polluters and resource extraction corporations define our environmental policies; industrial agri-business monopolies seek to destroy family farms and local food systems and undermine local decision making regarding agricultural practices.

Citizen movements in both conservative rural communities and progressive urban centers are proving that we can pierce the corporate veil by democratically passing local ordinances abolishing Corporate Personhood within their communities, thereby returning the power to make decisions to the local level in which corporations are subject to what communities feel best serves the common good. It's a rude awakening when a corporation can have local laws and regulations overturned to build massive factory farms, big-box stores or take ownership of municipal watersheds and drinking water, but citizens are winning a few battles against corporate interests, but winning the larger struggle to determine whether it's citizens or corporations that will control the future of our communities will depend on changing the rules of engagement.



Support Local Businesses!

Where people, not corporations, make the decisions. We all have the power to make a difference. By supporting local businesses, you can triple the impact your dollar has on the local economy.

Urban Myths – a walk on the lighter side

Some incredulous urban legends have sprung up about Hybrid technology and its battery, the most colorful being this claim about the hybrid being less ecofriendly than a Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV). Whereas the Hybrid technology is not without faults on the production end, it is a very significant step in the right direction. But SUV apologists are pinning their arguments of denial on one study done by a marketing company that was not peer-reviewed but, unfortunately, widely quoted in the media. Writer George Will, who is syndicated in 450 papers, penned an April 2007 column on the topic, headlined "Use a Hummer to Crush a Prius". The story was also pumped into the Internet-disinformation pipeline by gleeful bullies for whom size is apparently quite important, and before long the Hybrid had morphed into a sort of traveling toxic-waste dump trailing clouds of diabolical fossil-fuel exhaust.

You can disprove most of the false claims by doing a bit of math. Regarding the hybrid battery, let's say a Hummer is driven 200,000 miles in its lifetime. Its EPA rating is 12 miles per gallon in the city and 18 miles per gallon on the highway. Let's be real generous and assume it is driven only on the highway at a reasonable speed, yielding the maximum mileage. Divide 200,000 by 18, and you're talking 11,111 gallons of gas.

Next let's calculate the Btus in that amount of gasoline and convert them to kilowatt-hours. Gasoline has between 115,000 and 125,000 Btus per gallon, so the Hummer would burn through about 1.3 billion Btus over those 200,000 miles. Since there are 3,412 Btus in a kilowatt-hour (kWh) of energy, this would convert to almost 400,000 kilowatt-hours, which, at the rock-bottom price of five cents per kilowatt-hour, would be about \$20,000, or almost as much as the price of a Toyota Prius. If the energy to make the hybrid battery came from fuel oil, which has around 140,000 Btus per gallon, it would take an estimated 9,524 gallons of oil to match the Hummer's 1.3 billion Btus. At \$2 a gallon, that's also about \$20,000.

Now if Toyota is truly spending that much money on the battery alone, U.S. automakers can stop worrying about the Japanese competition pronto. Either that, or Toyota is cooking up the most brilliant marketing strategy in the history of modern capitalism: investing unprecedented prodigious funds into a loser. The reality is hybrids can significantly cut global-warming emissions, reduce energy use, and save drivers thousands at the pump.

One of the many flaws of the CNW Marketing study is that it was based on fudged figures. It assumes a Hummer would travel 379,000 miles in its lifetime and last 30 years, whereas a Prius would only go 109,000 miles and last 12 years. So of course, using these figures, the amount of energy needed to make the Prius is going to come out high on a per-mile basis. Using parallel mileage figures and the fact that a peer-reviewed Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) study shows that on average the production-side of a single Hybrid passenger car requires between 80,000 to 100,000 kilowatt-hours, the average SUV will emit 5-times more global-warming greenhouse gases than a Hybrid during its lifespan.

Of the more than two million-plus Hybrid batteries on the road today, only a very small number have failed and some fleet cars have already racked up 200,000 miles and the batteries are still going strong. The Hybrid batteries are also completely recyclable, and Toyota and Honda issue a \$250 carbon credit when they're finally retired.

So after much Hummering and hawing, let us put to rest this urban myth. The single most important step that an individual consumer can make to reduce your carbon footprint on this world is deciding what vehicle to drive, or not to drive, where real fuel-efficiency and carbon emissions figures will ultimately decide how we adequately address climate change.

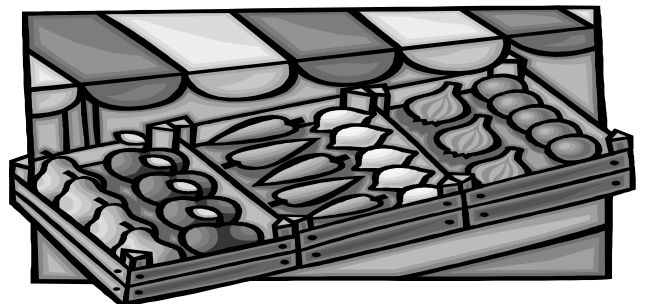
Oregon Rural Action

Oregon Rural Action is the only community organizing group located and working directly within the communities of Eastern Oregon. We support and encourage community organizing around locally-identified issues. Our mission is to bring people together to build strong communities. We do this by providing information and tools for local people to use in addressing the issues affecting our communities and by helping community members develop and implement solutions that work. Our members work together to promote healthy and sustainable rural communities, with a shared vision of creating a democratic and just society. Our members and community groups work to promote agricultural and economic sustainability, social and environmental justice, renewable energy development, and preservation of open spaces and stewardship of the region's land, air and water.

Locavore?

Locavore is 2007 word of the year

The New Oxford American Dictionary chose *locavore*, a person who seeks out locally produced food, as its word of the year. The local foods movement is gaining momentum as people discover that the best-tasting and most sustainable choices are foods that are fresh, seasonal, and grown close to home. Some locavores draw inspiration from the 100-mile diet (80% of all food consumed is grown or produced within 100-miles from home) Others just follow their taste buds to farmers' markets and community supported agriculture programs.



Do you have something to say to the Oregon Rural Action membership?

Call the office and ask about submitting an article for the next newsletter!

Oregon Rural Action - 2007 Year End Report

As we enter the last days of 2007, it is a worthwhile exercise to reflect back on what positive events and actions took place this year. What follows is a quick summary highlighting our successes. The following reflects positively on the countless hours and time put in by our membership – **Thank you to all!**

We uncovered significant racial and personal bias within our local Malheur County Food Stamp Program staff after gathering testimonies from individuals who met the necessary criteria to qualify for Food Stamps, yet were denied those benefits and/or were mistreated by their assigned caseworker. In conjunction with the State or Oregon Food Stamp Outreach Director and the Oregon Law Center, those certain local Food Stamp Program case-workers guilty of miss-conduct have been reassigned and demoted to non-public contact positions and many departmental policies and procedures have been modified to better assist those in need. Oregon Rural Action members continue to monitor the events taking place and making sure that the office is complying with the policy and procedure changes.

As a result of Oregon Rural Action sponsoring two community forums on residential solar hot water heating systems in December, 2006, 14 homeowners in Baker and Union counties have converted their homes existing electric or gas hot water heater to a solar hot water heating system.

Several members went to Salem on March 20, 2007 to testify on behalf of the State of Oregon passing a statewide Renewable Energy Standard of 25% renewable electric energy sources by 2025. We also submitted over 20 letters of support from our membership at the hearings. One of our local State Representatives cast the deciding vote that led towards the passage of the Renewable Energy Standard. Many members wrote letters and/or contacted his office asking him to support the legislation. Oregon now has in place the most comprehensive Renewable Energy Standard in the nation.

On March 25, 2007, Members of Oregon Rural Action incorporated the Blue Mountains Conservancy, Oregon's newest Land Trust organization. The Mission of the land trust is as follows: The Blue Mountains Conservancy is a locally based nonprofit, tax-exempt, conservation organization established for the permanent protection of land and resources. We offer stewardship, education, and advice for the conservation, preservation and enhancement of agricultural lands, private forestlands, natural, scenic and open space lands. Many Oregon Rural Action members have actively been working on a conservation solution for the 3,600-acre Mt. Emily parcel located two miles to the north of the City of La Grande. It was through our efforts and through the efforts of a very diverse cross-section of the community that the land owner has agreed to enter into an exclusive Purchase and Sale Agreement to place the property into local public ownership with Union County to secure a multi-use recreational area for our region thru various funding and foundation sources. In addition, on July 12, 2007, a private landowner in Union County donated 568 acres into the Blue Mountains Conservancy. This land encompasses some of the last remaining wetlands within the north end of the Grande Ronde River Valley.

On May 11, 2007, the Oregon Legislature passed Senate Bill 329 by a razor-thin margin and created the Oregon Health Trust and the Oregon Health Fund Board. Oregon Rural Action signed-on as a co-sponsor of that bill and a couple members of our communities sent gut-wrenching personal and family stories to the State Legislature of how the lack of adequate rural health care has claimed the life of a loved one and/or drained ones life savings. The finalized health care reform plan will be presented to the 2009 Oregon State Legislature, which more than likely refer it to the voters rather than drum-up the collective political will to fundamentally reform our broken health care system.

We continue our on-going efforts to enhance and develop local Farmers' markets through our 18-month Farmers Market Promotion Project grant through the USDA. We are on track to achieve the desired outcomes of the grant by having in place a local farmer's market in all 36 counties of Oregon and in the formation of the Oregon Farmer's Market Association, which will provide a staff person and non-profit entity that will be able to provide marketing, technical and organizational assistance to all of Oregon's farmer's markets as well as assisting in the development of new markets.

Oregon Rural Action members recently completed a Food Literacy educational curriculum to be taught in La Grande Public Schools to 1st graders. Initially, parents of school district children members came together to work to eliminate the amount of non-nutritious food being made available to kids and to have the local school districts purchase a portion of its food locally. While those initial efforts have been met with some resistance, the school district has embraced our Food Literacy Educational Program. Once a month, members of Oregon Rural Action volunteer to teach classes about eating healthier, eating locally, where our food comes from and the various ways in which it is grown and produced and other programs. The goal is to better educate our youth on the value and benefits of a robust local food system and to better understand how and why to eat a more nutritious diet.

On November 6, 2007, Oregon voters passed Ballot Measure 49, which will negate the numerous negative and un-sustainable development and land-use provisions that were set forth in Measure 37, which was previously passed by Oregon voters in 2004. Our membership and local chapters were very active in fundraising and holding public forums about the ramifications of Measure 37 and the benefits of passing Measure 49. We raised over \$800 for the Yes on 49 Campaign and held three public forums and two fundraising house parties.



*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, indeed it is the only thing that ever has –
Margaret Mead*

Clean Water Act News!

Factory Farm Watch

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced on November 22, 2007 that the agency has planned aerial surveillance of Oregon's Confined Animal Feeding Operations. Cory Parsons, OSU Extension livestock agent for Union and Baker counties, was at the November meeting. He says an EPA agent told him they would mostly be looking for point source pollution problems. The EPA also announced that they will be doing a series of un-announced site inspections of these operations.

Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) are required to have a permit from Oregon Department of Agriculture and be in compliance with the Clean Water Act. However both compliance and enforcement of the Clean Water Act in regard to industrial agricultural operations has been lacking in recent years despite that fact that a number of large Confined Animal Feeding Operations have moved into or greatly expanded operations within Eastern Oregon, in particular within Umatilla, Morrow and Malheur counties. This is a most welcome turn of events in that Oregon Rural Action was involved with the statewide process of creating a Governor-appointed task force to look at the CAFO compliance problem with both the Clean Water and Clean Air Acts.

Preserve Clean Water Act Protection!

The Clean Water Act passed by Congress in 1972 is a remarkable example of historic bipartisan efforts by the federal, state, and local governments to renew and refresh this country's water supplies. Unfortunately, a series of U.S. Supreme Court decisions have dramatically undercut the law and limited its jurisdiction. In Oregon the stakes are high as two-thirds of our state lies within a semi-arid climatic region in which the vast majority of Eastern Oregon waterways are at risk of being categorized as lying outside the scope of the protective measures set forth in the Clean Water Act.

In question is one section of the 1972 law that uses the term "navigable waters." The way in which this term is defined is the crux of the debate at the heart of recent court rulings. Over the 35 year lifespan of the Act, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Army Corps of Engineers has interpreted the waters covered by the statute broadly enough to incorporate not only our larger rivers but also streams, creeks and tributaries (including those of the intermittent variety) as part of the larger hydrologic systems, and it has worked very well. In 2001, 30 years of precedent was undermined by the Supreme Court ruling in *Solid Waste Agency of Northern Cook County (SWANCC) v. Army Corps of Engineers*. Subsequent Supreme Court rulings in 2003 compounded the problem, adding considerable confusion for regulatory agencies and water users.



What does it mean? Approximately 53-59% of America's stream miles outside of Alaska are seasonal waters or headwaters streams, representing nearly 2 million river miles and contributing to the public drinking water of over 110 million people.

According to the Northwest Environmental Defense Council, 62% of Oregon's total of more than 160,000 stream miles are intermittent or headwater streams. Therefore, as a result of the recent Supreme Court ruling, over 99,000 miles of Oregon's streams, creeks and tributaries are no longer protected by the Clean Water Act.

What can we do? Contact members of the Oregon Congressional Delegation and ask them to support House Resolution 2421 (HR 2421) and its companion bill in the Senate, Senate Bill 1870 (S 1870), to preserve the historical protective status for Clean Water Act interpretation and enforcement.

Your Voice is Needed—Participate in the Oregon Legislative Process!

With your help, we are making a difference in the work we do. We appreciate the many ways you support these important efforts!

You may have received this newsletter even though your membership is recently lapsed. Please consider renewing at this time. Your continued support is important to our efforts. Send your membership dues to Oregon Rural Action today!

**Please make checks payable to Oregon Rural Action
Send to: PO Box 1231
La Grande, Oregon 97850**

General donations are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by US tax law

**Or make your donation online!
at
www.oraction.org**

Sustainer's Circle

We now offer the opportunity to support Oregon Rural Action by an automatic monthly donation from your checking account. Join the Sustainer's Circle and become part of our backbone of support!

Contact your State legislators

www.leg.state.or.us/findlegsltr

For the first time since Oregon became a state in 1859, The Oregon State Legislature will be meeting in consecutive years rather than every other year. The 2008 Legislative Session will be a shorter, 90-day session instead of the traditional six months of past sessions. As information becomes available, we will pass on action alerts in an effort to have Oregon Rural Action and its membership be engaged in vital pieces of legislation that will impact our communities.

Contact your Federal legislators

www.senate.gov & www.house.gov

As mentioned on the previous page, please contact members of the Oregon Congressional Delegation and ask them to support **House Resolution 2421 (HR 2421)** and its companion bill in the Senate, **Senate Bill 1870 (S 1870)**, to preserve the historical protective status for Clean Water Act interpretation and enforcement.

Also please contact your federal representative and ask them to support **House Resolution 676 (HR 676)**, to establish a single-payer National Health Care System.

On December 18, 2007, President Bush signed the **Energy Bill** into law, enacting the first increases in Corporate Automobile Fuel Efficiency (CAFÉ) standards in over 30 years, as well as a new Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS) that will not only significantly increase production of renewable biofuels, but will also ensure that those biofuels are produced sustainably, without converting ecosystems or polluting the environment. The new law also includes provisions to promote energy efficiency. These are important reforms to U.S. energy policy that take a meaningful step toward a cleaner, more secure energy future. The bill is also noteworthy in that it does not include any funding for liquid coal production, which the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) vigorously opposed.

However, several other important policies were left out of the final bill. These include:
-The reforms to the federal oil and gas program that were pushed by WORC and its allies, including new protections for private landowners and water resources, and stronger bonding and reclamation provisions.


-A Federal Renewable Electricity Standard (RES), requiring utilities to produce 15% of their electricity from clean, renewable sources by 2020.

-An energy tax package that extended tax incentives for the production of renewable energy, paid for by rescinding tax incentives for the production of oil and gas, and other fossil fuels.

These provisions were dropped due to opposition from Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM) who led the charge against the oil and gas reforms and increased support for renewables in the Senate, backed by a veto threat. Senate Majority Leader Harry Read (D-NV) dropped the tax reforms from the bill last week after falling one vote short of the 60 needed to defeat a filibuster led by Domenici.

Page 8

Return Service Requested

20% Post Consumer 

NonProfit Organization
U.S. Postage Paid
Permit No. 24
La Grande, OR 97850

Oregon Rural Action
PO Box 1231
La Grande, OR 97850

