

from our viewpoint...

Federal agency picking on everyone

An editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* reveals the truth about the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: it isn't just small towns on the plains the agency is picking on with outrageous demands for new water plants. It's everyone.

"You can lead the Environmental Protection Agency to water, but you can't make it think," *The Journal* opines. "That's what New York City has learned after suggesting changes to costly, needless regulations that the federal government is imposing on Gotham."

The city wrote a 15-page letter to the agency explaining why meeting new federal regulations for drinking water will cost the city billions in unneeded improvements. One project with literally no benefit, *The Journal* says, is a \$1.6 billion cover for a 900-billion-gallon reservoir in Yonkers.

The agency says the cover is needed to prevent contamination by cryptosporidium, an organism that causes diarrhea. Government scientists claim the cover could prevent 112,000 to 365,000 cases a year, though in all of New York, only about 100 cases are reported each year.

So what if the city wastes \$1.6 billion in taxpayer dollars? *The Journal* says the city has spent \$15 billion since new water regulations came online in 2002, with the feds paying less than 1 percent of the bill.

Water users faced increases of 134 percent in that time, 91 percent just since 2006, in a city where living costs already are among the highest in the nation.

The editorial points out that the U.S. Conference of Mayors joined New York in March proposing that the government subject this and similar projects to a cost-benefit analysis, showing that the benefits to society will at least match the price.

Instead, the agency sued the city.

It's no wonder that small towns like Oberlin and Atwood, Colby and Goodland get no hearing when forced to build costly new sewer and water plants their citizens really can't afford. Government scientists know what's good for us, and that's that, cost be hanged.

So the out-of-control juggernaut that is Environmental Protection just keeps rolling over city after city, state after state. Cost is no concern. Need is no concern. Standards have been set and will be met.

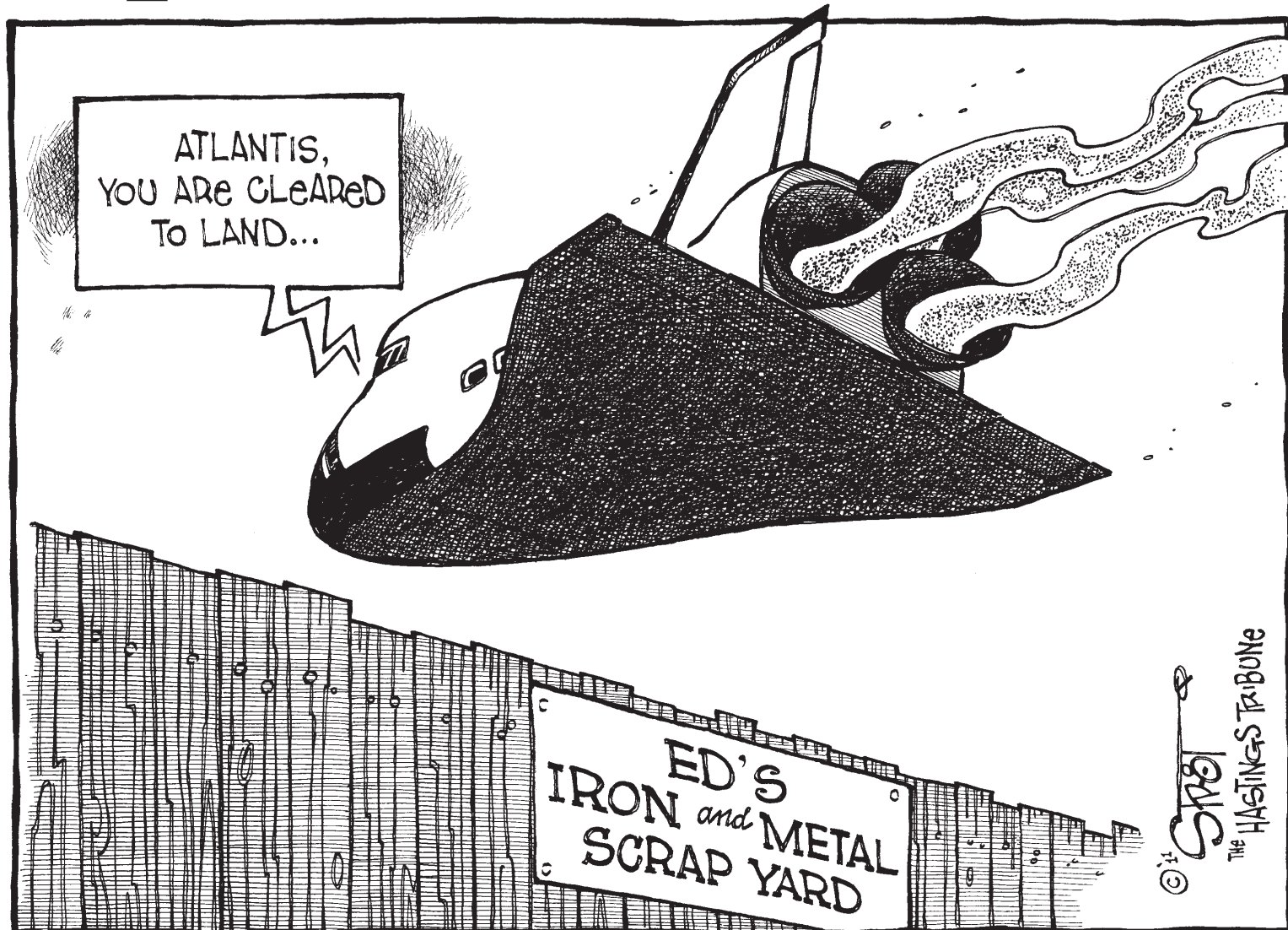
Many, like Oberlin, are being forced to meet standards for amounts of uranium and arsenic that couldn't even be measured a few years ago. People have been drinking our water for 125 years with no noticeable ill effects, except for the taste, but that's not the point.

The agency doesn't care if we can afford the work. It's no wonder living in this country costs more and more each year. It's not the taxes that are killing us, but the cost of regulation, in everything from water bills to electric power. And there's more to come; in Congress, no one dares to challenge an environmental edict lest they be branded as "ungreen."

Decisions that should be made on a practical, cost-effective basis instead are dictated based on arbitrary and often unreasonable standards. This dictatorship of regulation needs to stop, but none dares to oppose it.

And as we've seen, there's no city, no state big enough to resist. That is small comfort, however, to small-town residents hanging on in an uncertain economy and facing big bills for water and unnecessary water and sewer "updates."

If our senators, Pat Roberts and Jerry Moran, want to do something for their constituents and this country, this is the problem they would tackle. — *Steve Haynes*



What goes around comes around

The word oasis comes to mind when describing northwestern Kansas this summer. Although within a few weeks if the 100-degree plus temperatures continue, it may turn a bit drier.

But for now, in mid-July, the cattle graze in pastures with lush, tall grass. Each field of corn, beans or milo resembles a living green tapestry woven by the Master's hand. Dryland corn looks just like its irrigated cousin. Both have even, uniform stands colored in deep dark green while standing six feet tall. Powerful corn as farmers say in this part of Kansas.

And the wheat crop? You have to see it to believe it. And that's just what I did on July 14/15. I traveled nearly 240 miles west on Highway 36 from Manhattan to visit the Holle family in Rawlins County. Crops and grassland were green the entire distance in the upper tier of Kansas counties.

Once I pulled up to the wheat field, I climbed up the combine ladder and veteran Rawlins County farmer/stockmen Kevin Holle opened the cab. Old friends, we both sported broad smiles as we shook hands and I sat down in the buddy seat as we began to talk. I'd known Kevin since we were both kids nearly 35 years ago. Our two schools Atwood and Hoxie, where I grew up, were sports rivals.

Needless to say an hour sped by like the blink of an eye as we caught up and he told me about this year's wheat crop. He was running a Gleaner with a stripper head on a field approximately 22 miles southwest of Oberlin.

It didn't take me long to ask Kevin how the wheat was rolling into the bin. He pointed to



Insight this week

• john schlageck

the computer on the right side of the combine cab. The number 66 (bushels per acre) flashed across the screen.

Reports of 50-85 bushel wheat have been common throughout some counties in far northwestern Kansas this harvest. The only problem is showers have come through this region of Kansas nearly every other night since the end of June.

In Rawlins County, Holle says they've received nearly six inches of rain since July 1. Throughout harvest he cut around the bottom of terraces to avoid getting stuck in the wet fields.

"It's one of those unbelievable years," Holle told me. "It's just such a great feeling to watch the crop coming in like this."

Holle believes his wheat crop will average 65 bushels per acre. Yes, the last three years have been kind and bountiful for the Holles and other northwestern Kansas grain producers. Two years ago they harvested 180 bushel dryland corn. Their best crop ever.

"Everything has to come together just right," Holle says. "Timely rains, cooler temperatures when the wheat heads are filling or the corn is tasseling."

Still with the abundant harvest Holle knows what it's like to be on the other end of the stick.

During the beginning of the 21st Century, his family suffered through six years of drought, crop failure and heartache. He knows all too well what his fellow farmers across Kansas are feeling.

"I feel bad for the producers who can't get a rain for anything," the Rawlins County producer says. "I'd sure like to share some of this with them right now."

During those tough times beginning in 2002, it was so dry on the Holle pastureland they didn't bother to even turn their cow herd out on the grass. There wasn't any for his herd to eat. They also swathed their corn crop, rather than cut it for grain, to feed their hungry herd for six years.

"It's amazing what this country out here will produce with a little moisture," Holle says. "This year is testimony to that. The good Lord has blessed us."

Yes, so far in 2011 crops and livestock in northwestern Kansas have flourished. Crops roll for miles in green splendor with the promise of an abundant harvest this fall. That means farmer/stockmen like the Holles will prosper this year, set some aside for the lean years and continue to farm land that's been under their family's care for five generations.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau has been writing about farming and ranching in Kansas for more than 25 years. He is the managing editor of "Kansas Living," a quarterly magazine dedicated to agriculture and rural life in Kansas.

Minimum wage earners falling behind

Two years ago this week, 4.5 million of America's workers enjoyed a modest pay increase, as the federal minimum wage rose from \$6.55 to \$7.25 an hour. The increase was the final of a three-step boost enacted in 2007. Of those getting a bump in pay, more than three-quarters were adults, nearly two-thirds were women, and nearly half a million were single parents with children under 18.

Yet during the past two years, these working families have seen the real value of their wages fall. Minimum-wage earners working full-time make roughly \$15,000 a year. Had the minimum wage rate kept up with inflation, their paychecks would have increased by \$800 this year. Instead, our nation's lowest-paid workers have had an even harder time providing basic needs for their families. This is one more reason that Main Street is having a tough time recovering from the economic calamity brought on by financial collapse.

CEO compensation grew 23 percent in 2010, while pay for the average American worker grew only half a percent. Minimum wage workers have fared even worse: Since the 2009 increase, the real value of the minimum wage has fallen 5 percent.



from other pens

• commentary

The decline in value of the minimum wage during the past four decades has been even more dramatic, as prices for goods and services have risen much faster than the wage floor. If the minimum wage had kept up with inflation since the late 1960s, it would be \$10.38 today. Yet, roughly a quarter of the nation's work force is now earning less than that.

Instead of keeping the minimum wage current, Congress has acted just three times in the last three decades to increase it. The deterioration of the wage floor has helped fuel a level of economic inequality not seen in this nation since the early 1900s—the era of sweatshops and robber barons. With more and more income and wealth being transferred from working families to the super-rich, our economy, our democracy and the American way of life are under threat.

Some will say this is not the moment to be concerned with the minimum wage. But restoring the value of the minimum is in fact a key building block of sustainable economic recovery.

Businesses and economists agree that lack of demand is the primary driver of the stalled recovery and high unemployment. Without customers lining up for goods and services, employers will not expand their production or their payrolls. Raising the minimum wage would put more money in pockets of the lowest earners who have little choice but to spend their wages immediately. The Economic Policy Institute estimates that raising the minimum wage to \$9.50, as President Obama proposed during the 2008 presidential campaign, would generate more than \$60 billion in new consumer spending.

Wielding outdated economic theories, op-

ponents claim that raising the minimum wage will cost jobs and slow rehiring. The tired canard that the minimum wage causes unemployment recently received national attention when reporters revisited 2005 testimony in which Congresswoman Michele Bachmann argued that eliminating the minimum wage would wipe out unemployment entirely. This extremist view was roundly criticized, yet many corporate interests still promote the dogma that raising the minimum wage reduces employment.

While simplistic supply and demand theory suggests that employment will fall as wages rise, this 18th century model fails to capture the complexities of how the labor market works. Two decades of rigorous empirical research has revealed that increases in the minimum wage have not cost jobs or slowed rehiring, even during times of high unemployment.

Since the end of the recession, corporate profits have recovered and CEO compensation has skyrocketed. Corporations are sitting pretty on nearly \$2 trillion in assets that they refuse to use to expand production or rehire because the rest of America has little cash of their own to spend on goods and services. Raising the minimum wage will help Main Street share in — and power — a robust economic recovery. It's the least we can do for those with the least means to stay afloat and get ahead in a brutal economy.

Christine Owens is executive director of the National Employment Law Project

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