

from our viewpoint...

Should government pay for all disasters?

It started as just another Washington budget crisis: The Federal Emergency Management Agency, fondly known as FEMA, claimed with hurricanes and floods, it's disaster fund would drop below \$1 billion and it might not be able to help everyone.

Democratic senators called for billions more, then claimed Republicans were "playing politics" when they insisted on following budget rules and cutting something else. The Republicans noted the House had already passed a FEMA appropriation with more money.

Then the agency "found" \$40 million which it said would tide it over until the new fiscal year began Oct. 1. Why it needed "billions" more when \$40 million would do, no one could say.

Now, the controversy has faded. Hurricane damage is getting repaired. The floods are receding; roads and bridges are being rebuilt.

And this would be a good time to ask just what we expect of the federal government during times of disaster. For more than a century, the government has been involved in flood control and disaster relief. That was an issue in the 1928 presidential campaign, for instance.

But in recent years, the flood of money to Emergency Management—indeed, to all Department of Homeland Security agencies—has been immense. And no one seems to have kept count of where it all went.

Every fire department in the country apparently needed a grant to buy equipment, most of which would have been paid for out of local budgets—or just put off—in previous years. It's not that new breathing apparatus, radios and turnout gear aren't a good thing, just they're hardly a federal responsibility.

While money seems to have dried up some, Emergency Management continues to pump out dollars. Time was when a "disaster" meant something big: a blizzard, a hurricane, a massive tornado, statewide flooding, something truly beyond the local budget.

Not anymore. A few inches of water over gravel roads seems to qualify today. One area county sent people out to take pictures when water flowed over one of its roads last year so it could "get some of the federal money."

Years ago, the commissioners would have dealt with the issue without state or federal help, even if they had to cut somewhere else.

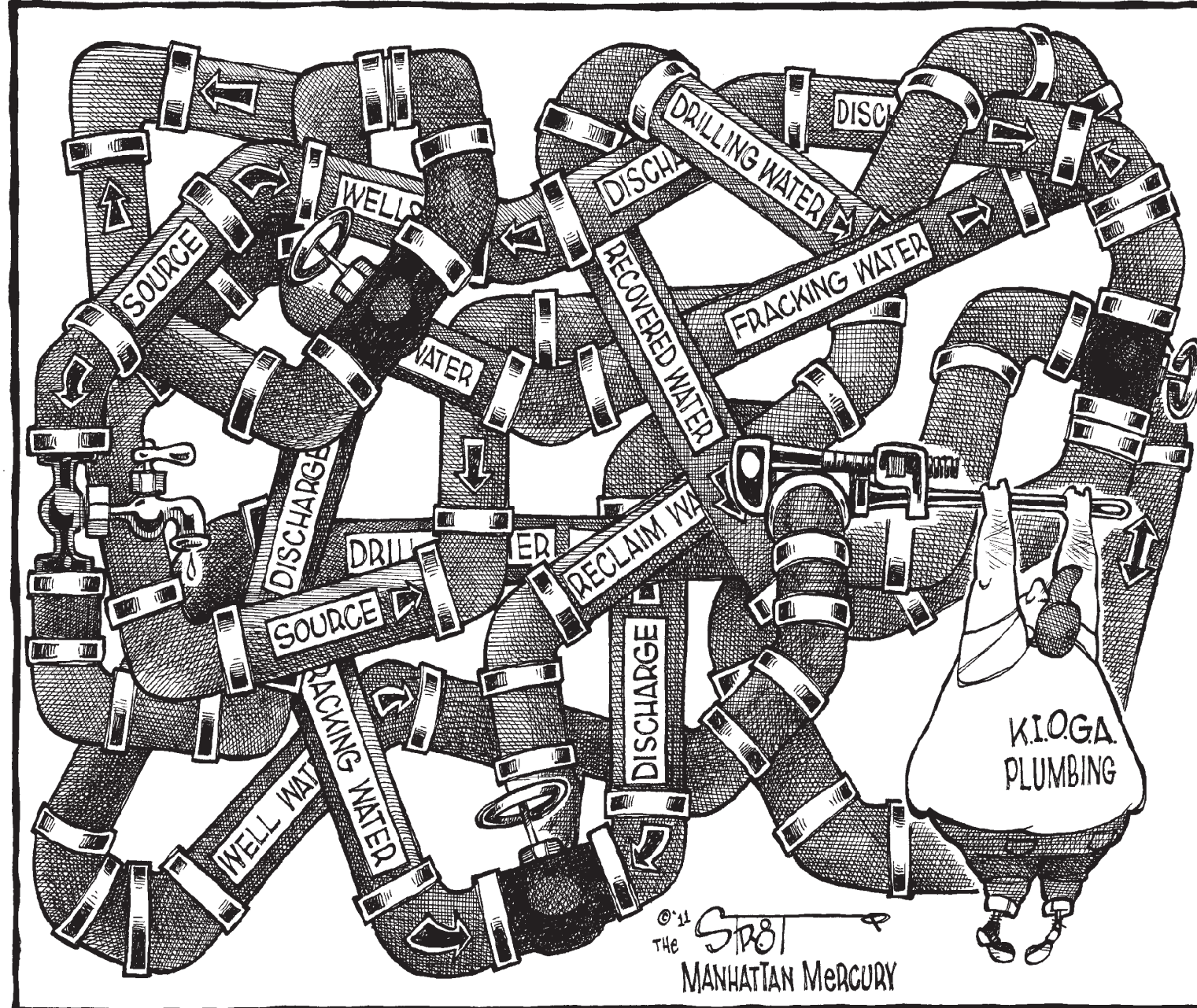
Today, why, if there's federal money out there, might as well get some.

We think those days are coming to an end, and rightly so.

The federal government doesn't have any money to spend, Congress is tied up trying to balance the budget and big cuts loom. It's a great time to look at all these federal programs and ask, "What must we really depend on Uncle Sam to do?"

We suggest the answer is, "To help in time of true need." States, cities and counties should handle their own bills the rest of the time and look to the feds only when they really need the help.

That should not be often. Besides, FEMA has a terrible reputation for messing up its efforts: bad trailers, big delays, poor response, unhelpful attitude. How can you depend on an agency that can't get it right?—Steve Haynes



I keep counting hay trucks

I've been on the road a lot lately traveling / between Garden City and Oberlin, Oberlin and 2 Colby, Kansas and Nebraska and Colorado and New Mexico.

As I go along, I watch the sunset, cars and trucks go by, the 4 crops, farmers working in the fields and the wildlife 5.

And 6, I've become sort of obsessive about 7 square counting the number 8 of hay and/or straw trucks heading south 9, 10.

Now, the question is—why and when did farmers in our area switch from small square bales to large round ones?

Bales in Colorado and New Mexico are mostly large and square, but here in Kansas and Nebraska, they are large and round.

Now and then, you'll see some small square bales, the kind they use for hay rides—although those are mostly straw instead of hay these days.

I went to Garden City at night, so I could



cynthia haynes

• open season

not see what I was passing that well. I could tell if the vehicle was a car or a truck, if it was a pickup or an over-the-road semi. But, other than that, I couldn't tell you if it was a cattle truck or a refrigerated truck full of oranges.

On the way, however, 11, it was light and I could see everything coming at me, 12 square.

Steve was editing 13 copy on his laptop as I drove northward 14, 15.

Earlier in the week, I had been to Colby and on 16 small square (wow you don't see many of those anymore) the way home I had noticed

farmers mowing and baling the right of way. One guy was so close to his corn that I thought 17 there might be a few ears in the next bale.

So on the two-plus hour trip from Garden City to Oberlin, I started counting 18 hay trucks.

I got up to 19 as I pulled off the highway onto Commercial Street. But then the next day on the way to McCook, I realized 20 that I couldn't stop.

They just keep coming 21 square and I just keep counting.

Help. Does anyone 22 know of a Hay Truck Counters Anonymous chapter out there?

I can 23 only hope the drought in Texas and the Southwest 24 is over soon so the trucks will stop going south.

In the meantime, we'll make hay, with or without corn in it, here, and I'll 25 count the trucks moving south.

Rescuing the middle class

As fall approaches, working-class families find themselves struggling with rising energy costs that consume an ever-larger percentage of their disposable income. As the decades roll by, it seems more and more of our paychecks are required just to keep the lights on, the car running and the house warm in winter.

Unfortunately, our national leadership appears increasingly unresponsive to the tectonic changes affecting the middle class. The solutions to problems always seem to follow the gambler's desperate strategy of doubling down on the current bet to make up for previous losses. The current energy proposal coming out of Washington follows this same losing strategy. The administration's Clean Energy Standard, now under discussion in the Beltway, looks to be the only major energy legislation to be worked before the next national election. It contains even more funds for the three dirtiest fuel sources; natural gas, coal and oil development. It commits Americans to the same bundle of fossil fuel resources, which are increasingly expensive, difficult to extract and costly to clean up.

Most egregious is the attempt to sell the public the same set of fuels as clean, via new miraculous technologies. Carbon capture from coal-powered electricity is still largely unproven and not enacted. Oil development always carries risks of spills similar to the BP gulf disaster and Yellowstone pipeline spill.

Technological innovation has done nothing to prevent these accidents. The Yellowstone spill alone is assessed to cost more than \$42



from other pens

• commentary

million to clean up, and has led to more than 100 damage claims from local residents. The cleanup efforts only found and removed 1 percent of 420,000 gallons spilled. The rest will remain in the environment, affecting local wildlife, ranchers and farmers until natural systems break the hydrocarbons down.

It seems doubling down on bad energy ideas knows no end. Consider the ongoing debate on the Keystone XL pipeline, which is projected to stretch 2,000 miles from Alberta, Canada, to Texas. TransCanada, the company touting the pipeline, already admits it expects 11 "significant spills" to occur along its route during the next 50 years. That's a significant spill every 4 1/2 years for the next half century. Technology does not make dirty fuel sources clean and safe.

Likewise, the continued investment in nuclear power is stunning in light of the ongoing disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in Japan. In late summer, a Japanese official said residents might not be able to return to their homes within the exclusion zone "for decades." If so, Japanese towns like Okuma and Futaba will join Chernobyl in the history books as radioactive ghost towns.

The commitment to continued nuclear investment in the United States is even more

outrageous considering the danger to operations from increasingly recurring "once in a lifetime disasters." Flooding in the Midwest required sandbagging efforts at the Fort Calhoun Nuclear plant in June, and Hurricane Irene prompted the shutdown of the Oyster Creek Nuclear plant in New Jersey. Neither plant experienced enough damage to affect public safety, but the continued effects of natural disasters causing the shutdown of U.S. plants highlight the potential for disaster.

So as fall approaches, let's consider some actions that deal with our rising energy costs while not pushing the same failed strategies. Renewable energy sources continue to drop in price and rise in efficiency. They could provide good paying jobs to a public at nine percent unemployment. Other countries are massively investing in these industries, but U.S. leadership seems devoted to pushing the same ineffective game plan. America can do better, should do better and needs to do better if we want to resolve the energy and unemployment predicament facing millions of Americans.

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