

Other Viewpoints

Separate farm bill from food stamps

It looks like the only way to get a farm bill passed out of Congress would be to separate it from the more controversial food stamp legislation. And logically, the two should be considered separately anyway.

The farm bill stalled last week in the House, where a five-year, half-trillion-dollar measure didn't get enough votes from Democrats and conservative Republicans – the former who didn't like new requirements for food stamp recipients and the latter who didn't think cuts to food stamps were enough. The bill would have cut about \$4 billion annually overall, including 3 percent in the almost \$80 billion-a-year food stamp program.

The Senate had passed a version of the farm bill the week prior, with about \$2.4 billion a year in overall savings and a \$400 million annual decrease to food stamps, which was just one-fifth of the House bill's food stamp cuts.

Clearly, the more conservative House is not going to support a farm bill that doesn't significantly slash the burgeoning food stamp program. The two Kansas congressmen – Mike Pompeo of Wichita and Tim Huelskamp of Hutchinson, who voted against the bill – are evidence of that.

"I could not vote for a bill that locks in the massive expansion of the food stamp program and spends nearly 80 cents of every dollar on food stamps," Huelskamp said. "Food stamp spending has nearly tripled since 2002."

Clearly, the food stamp program needs reform. Maybe means testing needs to be more stringent, and maybe it needs to be more restricted in the types of foods for which food stamps may be used. The program also reportedly is rife with fraud.

But the country also needs a new farm bill, one that does away with direct payments to farmers in favor of crop insurance to mitigate risk against our farmers.

Foods stamps and the farm bill got coupled so that urban members of Congress would support agriculture subsidies. But that marriage doesn't seem to be working anymore. It was the downfall of the legislation in the House last week.

Given how large the food stamp program has become, it doesn't make much sense to call this a farm bill anymore. And really the two are not terribly relevant.

House leadership ought to decouple these programs, work legislation separately and see what results.

— *The Hutchinson News, via the Associated Press*

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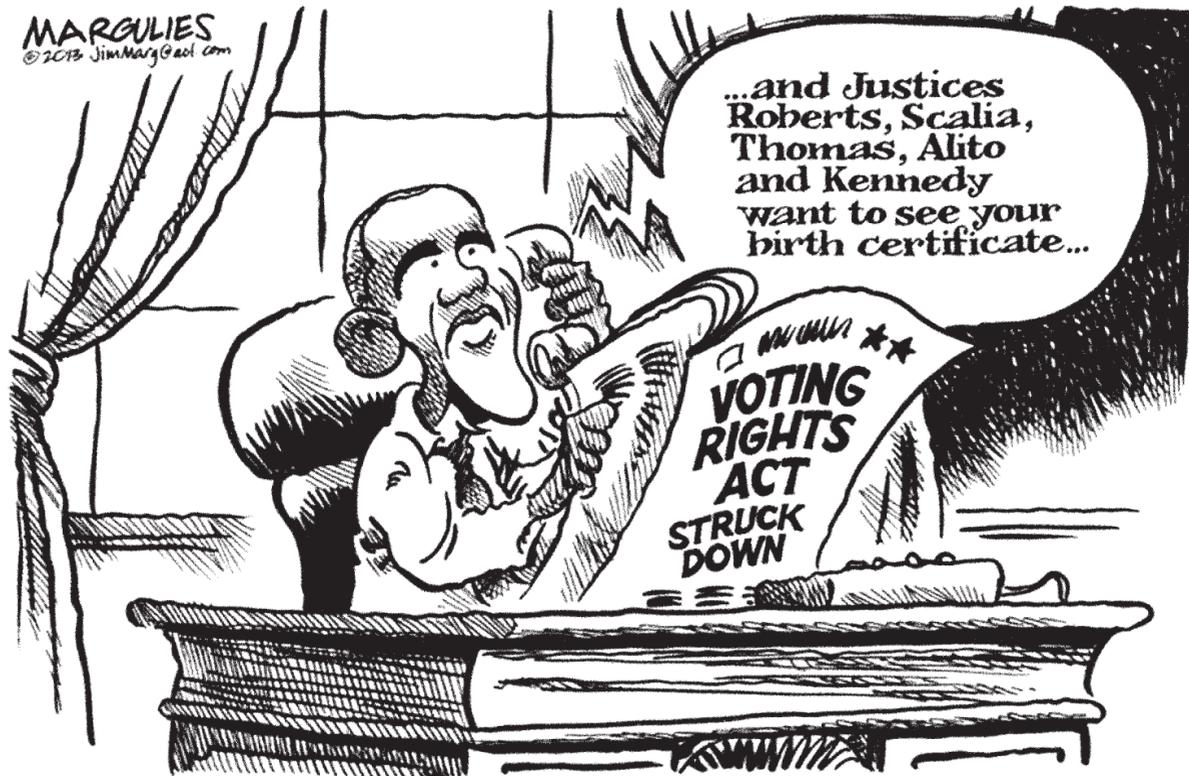
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MARGULIES
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Colorado fire strikes close to home

My little brother knew before I did. He called Saturday to ask how close our house in Colorado was to "the fire."

Duh. "What fire?"

"They've evacuated South Fork," he said, "and the fire may be headed for Creede."

Seems lightning had set the forest north of Pagosa Springs, in southern Colorado, on fire, and the howling south wind last week was driving the flames over the continental divide and through miles of standing dead spruce killed by the beetle epidemic during the last decade.

Fire experts said they'd seen nothing like it, a wind-driven frenzy that moved toward the tiny tourist town of South Fork at a mile an hour, leaping ridges and literally exploding the forest.

Hundreds of fire fighters and at least 40 engines were rushed to the scene, along with nearly a dozen helicopters equipped with fire-fighting buckets. Fire crews stood ready to defend the town, but for a day or two, officials were not promising that could be done.

Finally, the wind shifted more to the west and calmed down some. That filled our area around Creede with Colorado smoke, cutting visibility to 5 or 6 miles at times, but it allowed the flames to die down a little. The fire went around South Fork, growing to more than 70,000 acres.

As the threat eased in town, however, it grew in the canyon to the north. Officials closed both



Steve Haynes

• Along the Sappa

the state highway to Creede, known as the last of the great silver camps, and today, a thriving tourist hamlet, and U.S. 160 over Wolf Creek Pass. A smaller fire burned south of the pass, near the ski area, while the big one smoldered on to the north.

Then a third fire broke out in the wilderness west of Creede, consuming more acres of dry, dead trees. So far, however, fire crews have kept it west of the Rio Grande and have been able to save all the homes along the river. So far.

My other brother had planned to spend the week in Creede, staying at a little dude ranch way up on the headwaters of the big river. Instead, he and his family are renting a house in Ouray, to the west. He said he'd been told the fire jumped over the cabins at the ranch, taking only the roof of the pump house, but he didn't think being there sounded like much of a vacation.

All that left the house where we lived in the 1980s and where our kids grew up wreathed in smoke, but fairly safe. The house is out in

the wide, treeless valley north of the river, well away from any timber that might burn. If the blaze does close in, it and the town of Creede should be well defended.

My brother said the couple who own the guest ranch – she a dear childhood friend – told him not to bother coming to town. There wasn't much to do, they said, and the smoke was awful.

Still, Cynthia and I hope to get out there this week, at least to check the house and see how things are going. We're evaluating whether to take her summer car and the dog, as we usually do, since realistically, we may not be able to stay in the fire zone.

It seems odd, having the center of a national news event someplace too close to our hearts, but the fire itself seemed inevitable, the result of more than a century of fire suppression, leading to an over-mature forest that had to die somehow.

And while many government officials poo-pooed the danger, that standing dead spruce had to burn sometime. The expense will be horrendous, both for fighting the fire and to the small business owners who will lose much of a summer's revenue, but Nature will regrow the forest. That's how she works.

Steve Haynes is president of Nor'West Newspapers. When he has the time, he'd rather be reading a good book or casting a fly.

Courthouse matters to young people

To the Editor:

As a young person and taxpaying citizen of Colby, I would like to express my thoughts on the issue of the proposed courthouse replacement.

When I moved to Colby in June 2009, I will admit that I was somewhat apprehensive about settling down in "The Oasis on the Plains." However, I soon came to realize that my fears were unfounded and found Colby to be a pleasant ag-based community populated with friendly people and possessing all the amenities necessary for a comfortable lifestyle.

I appreciate the involvement of community members in efforts to improve these amenities and increase the quality of life, however I feel that the action being pursued by the county commissioners are not in the best interest of both present and future constituents.

My own father served two terms as commissioner in our home county (Montgomery), so I am well aware of the demands of that particular position and respectful of the tough decisions that must be made. With that in mind, however, I do feel that Mr. Steele may be pushing an agenda that is simply a much larger solution



Free Press Letter Drop

• Our readers sound off

than is required by the current problem of the judicial center – overcrowding and a dismal working environment created by what seems to be a building that was inadequate from the beginning.

Why not simply replace the inefficient structure at a lesser cost and retain the current courthouse for what it is – a functional building as well as a beautiful piece of Thomas County history.

I also do not agree with Mr. Strait and Mr. Steele's assumption that young people are indifferent to the appearance or architectural beauty of a municipal building. I believe that Thomas County residents of all ages can appreciate the style and grandeur of a historical

structure built by proud craftsmen and community members. I can assure you that the courthouse is one of the first landmarks that I point out to visiting friends and family.

In conclusion, I would hope that the board of commissioners will carefully consider all aspects of this issue, both fiscal and community responsibility, listen closely to their constituency and practice good stewardship of the resources entrusted to them.

Caleb Mattix, Colby

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

