

The Bill and Herman Show

The June 21 Bill Meyer Show on KMED sounded like a repeat of previous shows where Herman talks about fire and falsely claims Senators Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden are responsible for the Josephine County Sheriff's financial woes. Herman repeats his theory that forests "grow and disappear" through history because of fire, insects or volcanoes so humans might as well become part of that pattern by using the wood.

Bill begins the show by asking Herman if his fire buddies are concerned about this fire season.

Herman – Well a wet spring makes the flashy fuels grow higher. But they're going to cure later so it will probably be a shorter season. But at the end of the day, the tons per acre hasn't changed so the fuel loadings are extreme in my opinion. You know I always go back to my analysis Bill, to hear people talk about drought. Well I really want to know what the definition is but think of it this way, if I took a flower pot and I put one corn seed in there and every day I walked by I put a cup of water in there I'd wind up with a nice corn stalk at the end of the season. If I put 20 seeds in there, and every day I went by and put one cup of water, at the end of the season I'd have a bunch of little, short nothings. So that's what we have goin' on in our forests. We have so much competition for the moisture the fuel loadings are crazy. And that hasn't changed.

Bill – I've noticed even at transmitter sites and places that I go up on BLM land...I'm sitting here kind of looking over my shoulder a little bit wondering about fire because everywhere I look right now it seems like lots of underbrush, lots of, what do they call those...what's the definition of a kind of fuel...it's like the one hour fuels and the ten hour fuels. You know what are we seeing a lot of right now.

Herman – You're referring to dead fuels Ok. So that's what you're referring to but the herbaceous fuels, sometimes they can be referred to as live fuels but at the end of the day it's just tons of things that can burn. Now how the live fuels start burning is the dead fuels burn, they generate enough BTUs to dry the live fuels to the point where they can ignite and that's what you really watch for a lot as a fire manager is the first thing when you arrive at the scene of the fire...what is carrying the spread of the fire. If live fuels are being heated to the point of ignition boy that really perks your ears up.

Bill – Yeah, and so what I'm seeing right now though is I go up on BLM lands, on Forest Service lands for these servicings that I have to do there and I just see such load and this is what you're talking about though. It's like everything is thick everywhere you go. Right? Everywhere! Everywhere you go it seems to be thick whether it's underbrush and small trees. Everywhere you go. No difference.

Herman – Right and the fuels in historical photos that are almost 100 years old and you look at the landscape it was much more mosaic with a lot of areas that were open and they've all closed in now, I mean that's...we've suppressed fires for 100 years and that's a good debate...

Bill – We've also suppressed logging too. It was also a part of that mosaic was it not?

Herman – Right. Remember I always say you have to start with the premise that forests grow up and disappear. That is the natural cycle. So whether they do it by fire, logging, insects or volcanos sometimes, you have to start with that. We don't allow em to disappear and the fuel loading continues to get higher and higher and higher.

Bill – Alright. We'll certainly keep an eye on that for sure. Let's hope we don't have to worry about the volcano..ha ha ha ha. If we got the volcano we got bigger problems wouldn't you say? If you go by Mount McLoughlin you see all those lava fields in which the boulders blew out of the mountain when it was at 50 thousand you know tens of thousands of years ago. We don't want to see that again because, boy, talk about an existential threat huh?

Herman – Well, Mount St. Helens in the scheme of time was not that long ago.

Bill – You're right. You're absolutely right. Alright. Herman, why don't we shift gears here because a big conversation we were having on the show and I would imagine that you and the other commissioners are having these conversations Josephine County residents are certainly going to be talking where do we go with the sheriff's department funding? I guess the sheriff's department, from what I understand, I'm not an expert on this so I'm hoping maybe ask you about this, it appears the sheriff's department has burned through most of the reserves that had been there to try to pad and keep things going for a while now and now the budget's are pretty thin, pretty empty at the moment. What is the current status of it and what are we looking at?

Herman – Well, we're funded until July 1st of '23. After that the funding goes away. It has gone away. So historically Bill...funding for the sheriff's office has been funded by timber royalties or timber receipts from the United States government. Both through the O&C lands and the Forest Service lands and other BLM lands. Because of the political environment and I'll be quite frank, we have two senators that have absolutely against logging, those funds have evaporated. They're gone. They're literally gone.

Bill – And timber replacement funding that had been talked about a number of years ago, that's mostly gone now or is it still there just in a very modest amount? What's the current status of that.

Herman – Yeah, they have been ah, it's gone. That fund that they compiled over the years when we had excess money we didn't need it, that savings account is now gone too. So, because of the political environment we just don't have the funding so we're going to have to look at another way to replace this funding. This is not expanding the sheriff's office. This is to replace funding because the historical funding source is gone...well, I'll be frank, for political reasons.

Bill – So, how much money are we talking about needing? And I know that last week there was a proposal that was floated that was getting out there. I didn't detect a lot of support for it from listeners, but it had to do with charging a fee for absentee landowners in Josephine County. Like \$185 a year if I recall, that was being talked about. Just a proposal. I don't know what your opinion is on that. Maybe we could talk about that. Would that have solved the problem?

Herman – No. That only brings in less than a million dollars. So we need somewhere in the neighborhood of...well there's two fundings for the sheriff, the jail and then there's the sheriff's

office. The jail is funded through a levy so we don't have to worry about that for another four years. So now we're talking about

Bill – But you see, I bet a lot of people are thinking that jail levy pays for the sheriff's department. But not really, right?

Herman – No, it pays for the jail which is about \$8 million a year. It's quite a bit.

Bill – Well, wait, \$8 million a year to run the jail. Isn't your discretionary funds budget less than that? I think the only money that you actually control from your 58 cent property tax levy, isn't it about \$5 or \$6 million?

Herman – Five and a half million from that and then there's some other monies that flow in there. Some SRS monies and stuff like that but it makes up maybe \$13 million of discretionary funding.

Bill – So what you're indicating and letting us know is that law enforcement is expensive, right? It just is.

Herman – It just is. It's just expensive business. And so for the sheriff's office and patrol up to about 44 full time employees it's about \$13 million. And now, I have to be clear, these numbers move because of this crazy economy we're in.

Bill – And the inflation we're talking about cause the fuel's going up 8, 10, 12 percent a year, the salaries are going to go up and you have your PERS contributions that go up. It all snowballs doesn't it? It adds on to itself.

Herman – It does. So these numbers are in motion. It's a dynamic conversation. And that's what I warned my commissioners when we go out and talk about how much money we need: well that's today. What are we gonna need next year? So you figure Bill, I mean this is a big deal. Let's just say in round numbers we need \$13 million for this year. Well, next year we're going to need \$14.3 million.

Bill – And the year after that you'll probably need \$15 million if you're continuing with an 8-9-10 percent inflation. Depends on how transitory this stuff is, right? Usually, when you light inflation in the economy, it doesn't burn out quickly. Generally speaking. Is that not the case?

Herman – Well, you know Milton Freeman always said inflation's good for no one. So people think 'oh my house is worth more and all this' at the end of the day it's offset so you're right back in maybe a worse situation. So anyways this is a dynamic situation so we're looking to replace the funding. Some of these ideas, and you notice I emphasize ideas are ideas, is to float a 3 percent sales tax, seasonal sales tax six months out of the year, that's one idea. That could generate enough funds to probably take care of the sheriff's office and the Grants Pass Public Safety.

Bill – What does your local business community think about that though? Because I would imagine it would make Jackson County businesses look a little more competitive depending on what you're looking for, what you're buying.

Herman – They haven't...this is a new idea and they haven't weighed in yet. As I warn everybody, they will weigh in. The other idea is a law enforcement taxing district, which would be the entire county of Josephine with the exception of the incorporated area of Grants Pass.

Bill – And then you probably have the challenge that Grants Pass residents are saying, 'hey listen, we already tax ourselves for the Grants Pass Department of Public Safety. Right?

Herman – They wouldn't participate in that.

Bill – Oh, they would not? Ok.

Herman – Yes, it would be with the exception of Grants Pass.

Bill – Ok. Got it.

Herman – And then there's the method of another levy and that would be all the residents of Josephine County including Grants Pass and I don't know if the residents of Grants Pass would warm up to that. Because they pay for a police department. So, those are the current ideas that are starting to be floating around.

Bill – Could I raise something? And I'm just asking a question. I'm not advocating it alright? I'm just talking about realistically, alright? Your basic levy in Josephine County is 58 cents per thousand. Right? And it hasn't changed forever. Isn't that right? Been that way for a long time?

Herman – Right. It's locked in.

Bill – Ok. Jackson County is \$2 and a penny. Almost, not quite, more than three times larger. Sigh, Are we gonna have that conversation with people that the fact that there's no timber, there's no timber industry of any real size there, you're not spinning off these royalties any longer like once did, is it time to just bite the bullet and figure that you're gonna have to have a higher basic property tax rate? And I'm not happy about it. I'm just talking about the reality of it. Fifty-eight cents was great. There was a time when Josephine County had no property tax at all those times aren't now. I guess it's what I'm saying here. What do you think?

Herman – You're locked into that rate by Measure 5. (Actually it's more than Measure 5. In 1996 voters passed the tax rollback Measure 47 which was repealed the next year by Measure 50, a legislative-referred measure that left Oregon with a complicated property tax system.

Herman needs to read this... <https://www.oregon.gov/DOR/programs/gov-research/Documents/303-405-1.pdf>)

Bill – And there's no way that could be revisited by a vote of the people here to perhaps just add on or double the basic rate total?

Herman – Nope.

Bill – Can't do it at all?

Herman – No. We're locked in with that rate. Ok? A 3 percent increase in assessment is your only...that's it. So we got 10 percent inflation going on and we only get a 3 percent increase in

assessment so we're locked in with that. That's why you have to do levies, or taxing districts or some other idea because you can't change that tax.

Bill – Boy...it sounds like Josephine County, when it comes to law enforcement once again is between a rock and a hard place. Proverbial.

Herman – Yeah and you know I always try to point out to people, if you look at the patch that Josephine County deputies wear on their shoulder that says Josephine County Sheriff's Department it's a log truck Bill. It's a log truck.

Bill – Maybe it should be a hoop house now....guffaws. Put a hoop house on it...laughs. I know and yet that's the reality we find ourselves in and I wish they were doing more of that logging but you said this is a political problem with essentially your US Senators and your federal representation. In fact no one on the West Coast that's a senator in power, as far as I'm aware, is in favor of any realistic timber extraction or mining or anything else. Would that be fair? Or not?

Herman – That's the political reality I point out. There's five western states that can produce federal timber. That 10 senators out of 100. Then you have Washington, Oregon and California, those senators want to stop it. So now we're down to a possibility of four senators out of 100 to promote timber harvest on federal lands.

Bill – And this is why nothing has moved on that. This is a political issue. A political problem. Ok.

Herman – It's not gonna happen.

Bill – And yet I've talked with so many people running for county commission or running for this, that or the other say we're gonna get ourselves back in the log...we're getting back in the woods. Not gonna happen is it. Right?

Herman – Between that and the large landowners that don't the competition of raw resources on the market. Between those two it's simply not gonna happen in this day and age.

Bill – Alright. So I guess we have to put that out of our mind and quit wishing our way into something that's not gonna happen right now. Are there going to be any hearings though, some community meetings on this to talk about what actually could be done.

Herman – We're scheduling some after Fourth of July. I've directed our staff to have a meeting in Williams, Cave Junction, Merlin and then in Ann Basker in Grants Pass. So, we will get that information out soon as we secure those locations and we'll have a conversation. This is not a decision of the Josephine County Commissioners. This is a decision of the taxpayers of Josephine County.

Bill – Well I appreciate you coming on and at least talking about 'hey if you're going to talk about timber, forget it. It's like you're dead in the water before you even start though it shouldn't be, but as long as you have Merkley, Wyden and the various other people in power that is the reality. Where we find ourselves.

Herman – It's the reality. I mean, Wyden's been trying to lock up everything ever since he's been a Senator. And he's made headway on some of that. We've talked about that before.

Bill – So I'll tell you what Herman, stay in touch. We'll talk next Tuesday and we'll certainly stay on these meetings because people are going to have to get together and figure this out or maybe they're on the side where they just don't want a lot of law enforcement in Josephine County and that is the choice too. But you have to know what your options are. That's what these public meetings will be about.

Herman – That's correct. And the two questions that I'm asking the citizens of Josephine County is what level of law enforcement do you want and how much are you willing to pay? Those are the two questions.

Bill – And of course the willing to pay is usually 'we want the other guy to pay.'laughs. It's the same old question about taxation that's for sure.