

Opinion: Lack of oversight means problems grow, thrive

Yakima Herald-Republic Editorial Board

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A fire at the Caton Landfill near Naches taken around 7 a.m. on Dec. 11, 2022.

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The notion took hold sometime around the Reagan era in the 1980s: “The Government” is bad and it must be reduced as much as possible at every turn.

Regulations, rules, oversight in general — all bad. Let businesses work it out without interference from the dark forces of federal, state, county or city officials. After all, who knows more about any industry than the very people who run those industries?

So two generations of politicians have been chewing away at any rules drawn up to protect the environment — water, air, soil and so forth — against businesses that might be tempted to put profits over the public good.

And now, welcome to the future.

Ask the folks in East Palestine, Ohio, how the Trump administration's decision to do away with an Obama-era rule regarding train brakes has worked out. Ask them if they wish we still had the federal regulations that could've prevented a Norfolk Southern freight train from derailing and contaminating a 1-mile area around the wreck site, which spewed toxic chemicals for days earlier this month.

Closer to home, ask the folks who live near Rocky Top if it might help to have closer oversight of DTG Recycle's landfill, which seems to get noisier and less neighborly as it expands operations. Or check with Naches-area folks who live anywhere near the Caton Landfill, which, if we're lucky, might not be on fire for the moment.

Oddly, many of these "smaller government" politicians argue passionately that we must give law enforcement agencies every dime we can spare for the sake of protecting our communities. Enforcing traffic rules and chasing down criminals is a top priority, but preventing businesses from fouling our environment and threatening our children's health? Somehow, that's different.

The two local landfills are by no means the only commercial sources of community complaints and potential health hazards. Other businesses cut corners, get away with it and in small ways degrade our lives, too. And as distinctly different as the DTG and Caton landfills are, they have one key thing in common:

Evidently, they don't need to worry much about oversight or consequences.

No less than three government agencies have some sort of say in permitting and monitoring local landfills — the Yakima County Planning Department, the Yakima Health District and the state Department of Ecology.

Yet none showed much sign of stepping forward until neighbors were up in arms because of dust, after-hours racket or flames.

Why? We suspect it's partly because none of those agencies wanted to get entangled in a messy fight that could end up in court — as the Caton Landfill case has after county officials concluded the landfill was operating beyond the scope of its permits. And we suspect none of them wanted to be the bad guy. Nobody wanted anyone to think “The Government” was interfering in a local business.

It's also because those agencies lack the manpower to do much in the way of effective code enforcement. They wait until complaints pile up before they do much actual regulating. Instead of being out in the field, scouting for potential problems, it's all they can do to keep up with reading and reviewing permit applications, site maps and so forth.

The end result of all this is that companies like DTG, Caton and others know they face few, if any, consequences if their operations break any rules. Who's going to notice, let alone try to stop them?

It's another unsurprising result of years of deregulation fever.

Do government bureaucracies overstep sometimes? Sure they do. So do unscrupulous police officers — but that doesn't mean we should defund everybody and do away with all the rules.

Forty-plus years of anti-government baying seems to have successfully turned much of the public against all regulatory agencies, so it's probably pointless to suggest that county and state officials should get adequate resources to do their jobs.

But it's not unreasonable to expect those officials — shorthanded and underfunded as they might be — to improve interagency cooperation and clearly convey to businesses what the rules are.

It also seems reasonable to expect them to have the courage to stand up for the environment and for local health, which is what their agencies are supposed to be protecting.

Yakima Herald-Republic editorials reflect the collective opinion of the newspaper's local editorial board.