Opinion: The loss of glaciers is a warning to all Oregonians

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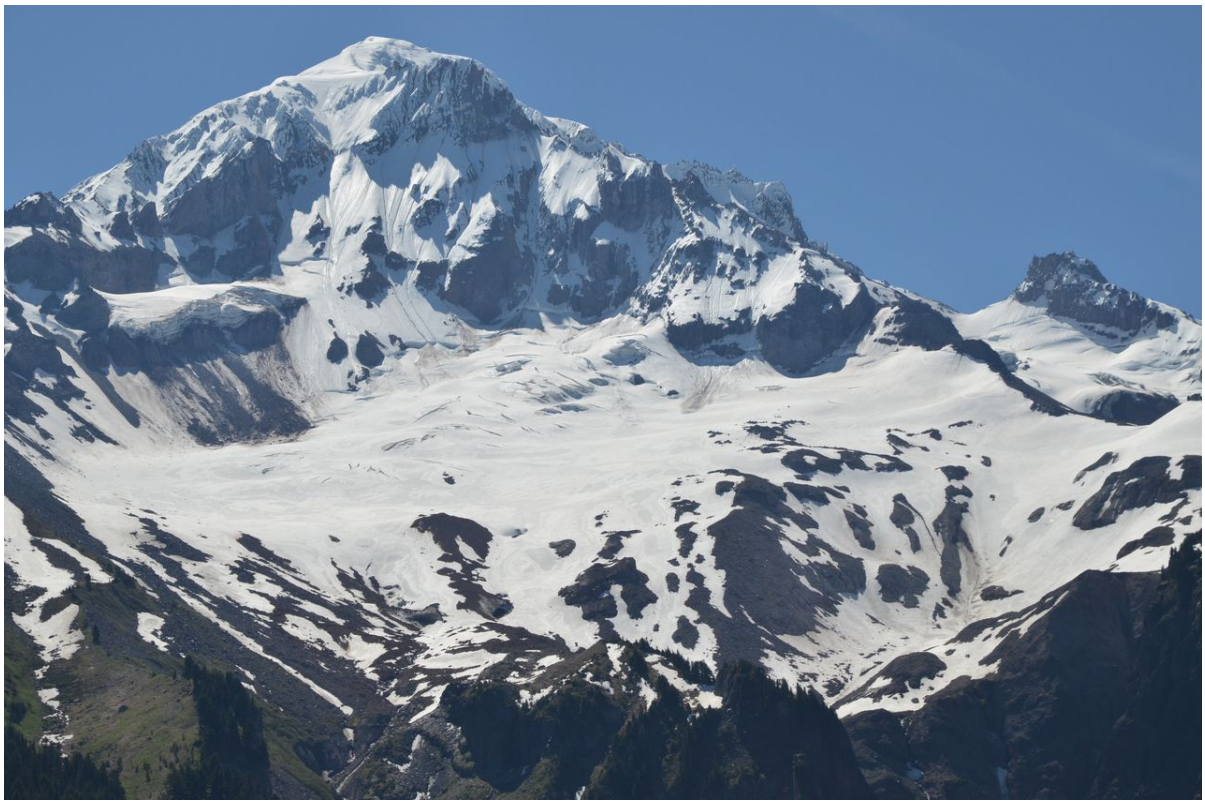

Mount Hood's Sandy Glacier. Terry Richard/Staff/ LC-LC-

By Guest Columnist
Tim Palmer

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Last month, the Oregon Glaciers Institute announced that the Clark Glacier, clinging to the state's third-highest peak, the South Sister, had died. Though made of inanimate snow and ice, glaciers "live" in the sense that they move when gravity pulls their surprisingly pliable frozen mass slowly downhill. But starved for adequate snow, this relic of frozen water had quit moving and was shrinking—on the way to disappearing altogether.

I'll never forget the moment I first laid eyes on an Oregon glacier, 50 years ago. I arrived south of The Dalles in the dark of a balmy July night, rolled out my sleeping bag in the sagebrush, and six hours later awakened to sunrise illuminating the surreal profile of glacier-clad Mount Hood. The lofty mass of snow and ice held me rapt, much as it might have done to travelers braving the Oregon Trail nearby two centuries earlier. The Pacific Northwest seemed like a dream to me that morning.

The glaciers will be missed by many of us who have thrilled to their white gleam on the horizon. But even people who don't care about glaciers will feel effects of the forces melting the ice. Our disappearing glaciers mean that snowfields lower on the mountains will also shrink as the climate warms, and that will cause a decline in the summertime flow of water to rivers, farms, and household spigots.

Less snow also means that streamflows will be warmer, threatening salmon, steelhead, and trout and the fisheries that rely on them. It means trouble for forests and tree growth, which benefit from snowmelt's moisture persisting in soil much longer than rainfall. Rising temperatures mean destructive flooding because winter storms will come as rain rather than snow—delivering runoff all at once. Hotter summers bring scorching sun plus blowtorch winds that stoke wildfires charcoaling forests, choking whole states on smoke, and incinerating rural homes as we saw in 2020 from Ashland to Clackamas.

While some people doubt the heating climate, the loss of glaciers is indisputable. Places where I hiked as a teenager are now turning to bare rock instead of the glistening veneer that had earlier sweetened the scene like icing on a cake.

Regrettably, it's too late to save Oregon's glaciers from global warming. But to avoid the more painful effects of hotter days, we have little choice but to fight back. All reputable scientists report that excess carbon in the atmosphere causes the warming, and that the carbon overload comes from burning fossil fuels, cutting down large trees that otherwise sequester carbon and depletion of soil that once stored carbon as rich organic humus. That's the bad news that the melting glaciers tell us. The good news is that climate warming can be reversed if we muster the personal and political will to do it.

The changing climate affects us all, but especially rural Oregonians like me who live and work at the front line of diminishing streamflows, aggravated flooding and volatile, smoky fire seasons lasting longer each year. Much can be done. Yet most of rural Oregon's elected officials oppose efforts to address the crippling hazards that hurt the people they represent.

Anyone with views to a snow-capped mountain—whether from the front porch orwhile driving Highway 97—can be reminded that, as the climate warms, everything is at stake. Our water, fish, forests, homes, livelihoods, and refreshing views to snow-covered mountains could all suffer the melting fate of the glaciers—or not. It's up to us.