

No map should muffle our voice

Every 10 years, the nation takes a census to find out where our fellow Americans reside, so they can be better represented in the political process.

Based on those results, those states or locales that increase in population get more representation; conversely, influence recedes in the states or areas that lose voters.

While fairness is in the eye of the beholder, redistricting is ultimately controlled by those in political power. The resulting redrawn districts are often a craven attempt to hold on to such power. Ahhh, the art of gerrymandering.

The origins of the term “gerrymander”

According to the Smithsonian, Elbridge Gerry was a powerful voice in the founding of the nation. Today, he’s best known for a political practice with an amphibious name.

Gerry was a Founding Father. He signed the Declaration of Independence and was a reluctant framer of the Constitution. He served as a congressman, a diplomat, and the fifth vice president of the United States. Well-known in his day, Gerry was a wild-eyed eccentric and an awkward speaker. He was a trusted confidant of John Adams and a deep (if peculiar) thinker.

He could also be a dyspeptic hothead. This trait got the better of him when, as governor of Massachusetts, he signed an infamous bill that created misshapen districts, including one that resembled a mythical salamander, with claws and wings.

People combined the pol’s name with the beast, and the term “gerrymander” was coined. Ever since, it’s been used to describe some politicians’ practice of drawing district lines to favor their party and expand power.

Today, we see gerrymandering in Ohio’s 9th district, aka the “Lake Erie Monster,” and Pennsylvania’s 7th district, aka “Goofy Kicking Donald Duck.” (Google these.)

We see equally stupid contortions of state and congressional districts in every corner of the country and in Oregon. Legislative lines are not city or county lines — rather, they are supposed to bring together communities of interest. I live in unincorporated

Clackamas County near the Tigard-Portland-Lake Oswego triangle. What on earth do I have in common with Stayton, Oregon some 50 miles away? The love of good pizza is not a community of interest.

How Oregon is changing

When it comes to redistricting, there’s good news and bad news regarding our state. The good news is that more people are moving to our little slice of the country. It is hard to argue against the best farmland in America and exceptional wonders like the Columbia Gorge, not to mention our mountains and rugged coastline.

We are not the beret-wearing, mushroom-hunting, antifa-loving community that is lampooned in the media. We are fiercely independent, connected to the natural beauty in work and play — and yes, we make exceptional wine and beer.

This year, Oregon gets to add a sixth Congressional district — which is terrific. The state is becoming more racially diverse — for the first time more people of color were born here. They will eclipse 50% of the state’s population in 20 years.

But there are warning signs. The rural areas are shrinking, and urban areas seem to be boundless. The drain on rural areas is a real thing. This is not only happening in Oregon, but across the country.

What does this mean for the nursery and greenhouse industry that is both urban and rural? The bulge of voters in urban areas expands the disconnect between economies, perspectives, and policies at the state level. Landmass does not equate to votes.

The continual widening of the divide will only cause conflict and hard feelings. Oregon’s new congressional map looks like pizza slices emanating from the city of Portland — a cynical effort at best.

No map can mask your voice

A coalition of Oregonians is pushing to create a “citizen’s commission” in charge of redistricting, by putting a measure on the 2022 ballot. Taking the inherent self-interest out of map-making is a good start, but let us not be lulled into complacency. Redistricting is always a political beast.



Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Rural areas are losing. In order to prevent isolation and dismissal by urban folks who have never gotten their feet dirty or worked in a field growing up, we need to go on offense and tell our story.

Oregon’s nursery industry does not plan around election cycles or even redistricting timelines. We play the long game. That’s good, provided the short game doesn’t lay waste to the capacity for sensible economic and regulatory policy.

Regardless of whether an OAN member is conservative or liberal — we need engagement at every touchpoint of the political process. We must lend our voices to our churches, school boards, soil and water conservation districts, and city halls, all the way to the halls of Congress.

Our blended voice is powerful. No map can mask your voice.

What we can do together

It’s time to get off the bench. Indifference and avoidance are the silent killers of our industry. The association has broad shoulders, keen political senses, and a highly functional volunteer system and board of directors. We preach the idea that seeing is not just believing, but understanding. That’s why we offer tours to gubernatorial candidates, elected officials and state agency personnel. Doing so is our great natural advantage.

I am proud of the effort being made by so many of our volunteer leaders. They are the first and best advocate that the OAN has. We come together as one for an industry that we love. I encourage all in our industry to put aside any apprehension or distaste for public engagement, because we need you. ☺