

*There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil
to one who is striking at the root.*

Twenty-Five Actions to End Growth in Oregon

Andy Kerr, President
Alternatives to Growth Oregon
March 2002
Second Printing



Alternatives to Growth
O r e g o n

205 SE Grand Ave., Suite 203
Portland, OR 97214-6101
503-222-0282
www.AGOregon.org

Introduction

The state's population is expected to grow by another one million people to 4.3 million during the next quarter-century.

Most government policies promote, if not require, growth, not(yet)withstanding the wishes of Oregonians.

Oregon's present population and consumption are environmentally unsustainable. Alternatives to Growth Oregon advocates that our state determine its optimal population and begin the walk toward ecological carrying capacity.

Only 2% of Oregonians think the state's population is "too small." 65% think that we are "the right size." Remarkably, 29% think our state's population is already "too large."¹

Nonetheless, the state's population is expected to grow by another one million people to 4.3 million during the next quarter-century.² It is a projection that assumes many things, including that the citizens, communities and government of Oregon will do nothing to prevent it, and in fact do everything possible to encourage—and pay for—the growth.

Today, most government policies promote, if not require, growth, not(yet)withstanding the wishes of Oregonians. But wishing does not make it so. Concrete steps are necessary to prevent more concrete from overwhelming Oregon.

Like any good treatment program, the first thing is to admit we have a problem. The public does, but most politicians and business interests are still in denial. It is difficult to get someone to understand something when their bottom line, job, or lifestyle depends upon them not understanding it.

I'm going to list twenty-five actions that individuals, communities and government can take to end growth in Oregon. They are good policy for individuals, communities, and government. No one has to suffer—hair shirts are not necessary. In fact, by turning away from growth, we can find more time and resources for ourselves, our families, our communities, our state, our country, and our planet.

There is no one action that will end growth. Let me repeat. No one action—not just Americans breeding less, not just everyone else breeding less, not just Americans consuming less, not just limiting immigration to the United States, not just voluntary simplicity, not just government regulation, not just market incentives, not just tax-reform, not just a better distribution of the wealth. Not just one of anything will end population and consumption growth.

For numerous, but varied reasons, many people tend to favor a "hole-in-one" approach—even though it's a very dumb strategy to improve one's golf game. They focus on one of the many necessary strategies, often to the exclusion of the others. Most important of these reasons are:

TWENTY-FIVE ACTIONS TO END GROWTH IN OREGON
ANDY KERR, ALTERNATIVES TO GROWTH OREGON

- ♦ the traditional human response of wanting others to change their behavior while not changing one's own; and
- ♦ political judgments that some changes in public policy or individual behavior are too controversial to address.

The result is that population and consumption continue to increase. Only by adopting a broad range of reforms—both governmental and personal—will population and consumption growth end. Effecting major social change is a complex process, and it takes time. Such reforms will be more acceptable politically as a package, because individuals and governments are more willing to change if they see that others are also changing at the same time.

We all have to pull our own weight. Each and every of us may prioritize differently, and that's fine. Acknowledging that all are necessary actually improves the political chances of enacting your favorite reforms.

So, no whining. No questioning why should “we” do something when “they” aren't. Let us lead by example. Oregon has led the way in major policy innovations in the past, and adopting policies designed to help us live within our local ecological carrying capacity will be yet another example for our descendents to point to with pride.

The twenty-five actions to end growth in Oregon can be grouped into five broad categories:

- A. Stop Paying to Foul Our Own Nest**
- B. Acknowledging and Embracing Natural Limits**
- C. Investing in People, Not in Corporations**
- D. Making the Economy Work for People, Not People Work for the Economy**
- E. Making Government Work Again**

A. Stop Paying to Foul Our Own Nest

1. End subsidies of tax dollars to new housing development.

As taxpayers, we provide at least \$33,000 of taxpayer subsidies for the average new house in Oregon. These costs—in the form of roads, water lines, sewers, police and fire protection, schools, libraries, parks and other infrastructure—for the most part are not paid for by the new house owner or the developer.³ These costs are in addition to the local environmental impact when new housing developments pave over forests or farmland. It would be better—and less costly—for the taxpayer, community and environment if municipalities bought up all the undeveloped lands within their boundaries and made parks of them all, instead of continuing to deplete local government coffers with subsidies for new housing development.⁴

As taxpayers, we provide at least \$33,000 of taxpayer subsidies for the average new house in Oregon.

2. End incentives for industry to move here.

In the name of creating jobs, Oregon taxpayers give subsidies to industries to move here. AGO has commissioned a report detailing many of the myriad of tax-breaks and other subsidies to new factories and businesses to locate in Oregon. These new factories create new demands for government services, while not paying enough taxes to supply them. The jobs they bring increase the demand for new residents, which increase the demand for new houses, which increases the demand for more government subsidies, which raises taxes and/or lowers government services and end up costing existing taxpayers a bundle (and they still have the same old job!).

3. Restructure the tax system to encourage small families and discourage large ones.

Society should pick up, through tax subsidies, most of the costs for the first child by generous assistance and/or tax credits. The costs of the second child should be equally shared between the state and parents. Parents should pay the full societal cost for additional children.

4. Restructure the tax system to encourage efficient consumption and discourage wasteful consumption.

Today we tax “goods” such as income, earnings, and savings. Instead, we should tax “bads” such as pollution, traffic, sprawl, wasteful energy use, and excessive consumption. An environmentally friendly tax structure can result in less of the bad things and more of the good things.⁵

5. Replace the income tax with a progressive consumption tax.

We want people to have more income (and to be able save some of it). We want them to consume more efficiently and without waste. A consumption tax is not a sales tax. It would work like this. At the end of the year one figures their income as they always do. Subtract any savings and investments made that year. The rest was spent consuming. Exempt the first, say \$40,000 of expenses for a family of four, for basic expenses of food, clothing, shelter, health care, etc. Tax the rest at progressively higher rates. As consumption rises, so does the relative tax. Bill Gates can still build his \$100 million house, but maybe it would cost \$300 million after taxes.⁶

6. Shift the property tax on land and improvements to a tax only on land.

Property taxes, as we know them, are actually two distinct taxes, which are in conflict. Property taxes are both a tax on land and the buildings on the land. Taxing land is good, taxing buildings is bad. Alan Durning notes in his book *Tax Shift*, “(a)s experience in Australia, New Zealand,

Today we tax “goods” such as income, earnings, and savings. Instead, we should tax “bads” such as pollution, traffic, sprawl, wasteful energy use, and excessive consumption.

Taiwan and Pennsylvania shows, shifting taxes from (buildings) to (land) aids compact development while suppressing land speculation, promoting productive investment, and tempering housing costs, especially for the poor. Land, like clean water, is a finite resource.”⁷

In summary, by making Oregon government growth-neutral, lots of tax money becomes available. One-third of these savings should go to lower taxes, one third to restoring lost government services and one third to new socially desirable investment. Let’s spend the saved money on making Oregon better, not bigger.

*We have four times
as much stuff than
our grandparents did.
Are we four times as
happy?*

B. Acknowledging and Embracing Natural Limits

7. If you want children, have no more than two— and preferably one.

If you really do not want children, do not have them. Over the long term, the difference between a population explosion and population stability is the third child. In the short-term the difference between 6 and 10-14 billion people on Earth is the second child. Children are priceless. But excessive numbers of children devalue all children. Most people think the most expensive purchase they make in their lives is their house. Wrong. It’s your child. According to the US Department of Agriculture, a first American child costs a middle income family \$160,140, through the age of 17—not including college.⁸ That’s \$741.39 per month. Consider the alternative investment opportunity. Investing that amount with a long-term return on investment of 8% yields a third of a million dollar “nest egg.” You could retire much earlier, work much less, travel much more, and play more often. You could write the great American novel, volunteer for your favorite cause or have a hell of a stamp collection. If you do want to invest in only one child, but fear screwing it up as an only child, don’t sweat it. It’s a myth. Sibling-free children have no more problems than those with siblings.⁹

8. Restrain your own consumption.

Does that third television, third garage, or third house make you three times as happy as the first one? Evolution, natural selection, competition, greed, and envy are but a few of the reasons why we want stuff. More stuff than we need, more stuff than we really want, more stuff than we—or the Earth—can afford us to have. We are in a society of unparalleled material wealth. We have four times as much stuff than our grandparents did. Are we four times as happy? It’s worth reading some books—preferably from the library—on the subject to understand yourself and why you consume and how you consume.¹⁰ Only then can you learn to consume in an economically, environmentally and person-

ally responsible manner. Excessive consumption is not only detrimental to the Earth; it's harmful to the soul.

9. Determine Oregon's optimal population and ecological carrying capacity.

The Governor should appoint a blue-ribbon panel to address the question of Oregon's optimal population. To determine what is the state's environmental carrying capacity, society needs to debate the question. A debate will force us to answer a variety of questions, such as:

- ◆ How clean—or dirty—do we want our air and water?
- ◆ Do we want salmon? Enough to eat? Or just museum runs? Or at all?
- ◆ Do we mind booking our favorite fishing hole or mountain-top through Ticketmaster?
- ◆ How crowded do we want our classrooms?
- ◆ Do we want to drink out of the same rivers we excrete in?
- ◆ How high do we want our taxes?
- ◆ How low do we want our government services?
- ◆ How much elbow room do we want?

After society asks and answers these and similar questions, the planners can easily determine a range of population that Oregon can sustain and which can sustain Oregon.

10. Limit immigration to the United States to be equal to that of emigration.

Because of our excessive levels of consumption, the most overpopulated nation on Earth is the United States. The Earth and its inhabitants cannot afford any more Americans, be they bred here or imported. Yes, Americans must breed less. Yes, Americans must consume less. But there must also be fewer Americans.¹¹

Immigration is a very divisive and sensitive issue that nonetheless must be discussed. To those who support generous immigration, think about this: Why are you on the same side as Microsoft and Archer Daniels Midland and the like who want surplus labor to drive down American wages? The U.S., like any other place, has ecological limits. American's lifestyles push those limits. Beliefs in ecological limits, or its opposite, the "endless cornucopia" view of the planet, cuts across political lines. However, science tells us that even if fairly distributed to all the people on Earth, what we are doing—especially in the US—is not sustainable. We have too many people consuming too much stuff.

To those who oppose immigration because of racist and/or xenophobic reasons, I say to you: Go to hell. The issue is immigration, not immigrants.

Because of our excessive levels of consumption, the most overpopulated nation on Earth is the United States. The Earth and its inhabitants cannot afford any more Americans.

The charge of racism is often leveled from the Left toward anybody that favors reduced immigration for any reason, even if the reason is ecological carrying capacity. Their argument is that since the majority of current immigrants are non-Caucasian, that to be white and for immigration reform is racist. This doesn't explain away the majorities of non-Caucasian Americans that polls tell us also favor limitations on immigration.

Living in America—because of our relative freedom and material splendor and its marketing through mass media—is the hope and dream of at least one-third of the world's population. At least two billion people would come to America if they had the chance. Only those whose position is one of totally open borders can morally levy the charge of racism. If one supports any limits on immigration, then, under such reasoning, they are racist—it is just a matter of degree. Making the racism charge stick—in such a United States with 2.3 billion people—is another matter.

About 100,000 people leave the US each year. That's enough to take care of political refugees, especially if we also change US government foreign and corporate policies that create refugees. It's also enough for immediate family reunifications. If we Americans want more immigrants, then we Americans should breed less so we have room for them.

In summary, acknowledging that nature has limits that we dare not transgress is not only an act of species-wide humility, but of global self-preservation.

C. Investing in People, Not Corporations

11. Wage another war on poverty and this time win it.

Since Social Security and Medicare for the elderly were implemented, senior poverty has declined two-thirds. People deserve as much help at the beginning of their lives as at the end of their lives. Providing our citizens adequate medical care at all ages, especially reproductive health care, is a sane and civilized proposal. The correlation with ecological sustainability is clear: poor people have more children than the middle-class and rich.¹²

12. Replace the minimum wage with a living wage.

The most efficient way to end poverty in this nation is pay people enough money for their labor to live on. The current Oregon minimum wage—higher than the federal wage—is \$6.15/hour. That includes no benefits. A living wage for a household of one in Oregon is \$10.07 per hour.¹³ If the price of Big Mac costs a nickel, dime or dollar

Acknowledging that nature has limits that we dare not transgress is not only an act of species-wide humility, but of global self-preservation.

more, so be it. Henry Ford is still right: workers should earn enough so they can afford to buy the products they make.

13. Redistribute Some Wealth—Or At a Minimum, Stock Options for All.

Success in our economy is defined as a booming stock market where jobs are considered a cost, not a benefit. Rising wages are considered bad because they are inflationary. In the past two decades, income for our richest fifth has increased 52%, for the poorest fifth it has decreased 13%, and the middle fifth has remained unchanged.¹⁴ If the laboring classes are to be laid off and laid on at the whim of Wall Street, then they at least ought to be given stock options so as to share in the dividends and increased market capitalization achieved at their expense.

14. Break the cycle of child sexual abuse.

According to Northwest Environment Watch founder Alan Durning, “(v)ictims of child abuse often feel that having a baby will help them heal from the violation they have suffered.”¹⁵ Children having children is a societal problem that must be addressed for all kinds of important and just reasons. It would also result in lowering population increase.

15. Make every pregnancy a wanted pregnancy.

“An estimated 10 percent of babies born in the Northwest are unwanted at conception—they are conceived accidentally at a time when the mother wants no more children,” notes Durning.¹⁶ Access to all kinds of birth control must be available to all sexually active people irrespective of age or income. “If all pregnancies were intentional, the long-term rate of population growth from all sources would decline by about 12 percent,” according to Durning.¹⁷

16. Support full funding for domestic family planning.

Ensure that adequate family planning information and services are available to all. This includes teaching sex education in school and providing birth control options, including access to abortion, to all sexually active people.

17. Support full funding for international family planning.

As the world’s richest nation, we have a moral obligation to support international family planning efforts, including birth control and abortion. It is also in our national interest.

In summary, people who are poor have more children than people who are not. If we want to control population, we must end poverty.

If the price of Big Mac costs a nickel, dime or dollar more, so be it. Henry Ford is still right: workers should earn enough so they can afford to buy the products they make.

D. Making the Economy Work for People, Not the People Work for the Economy.

18. Internalize those externalities.

Let's be economically responsible and charge those who profit from activities that exploit the environment and/or people to bear those costs, rather than society or the environment. By doing so, many social and environmental problems would self-correct.

Let's be economically responsible and charge those who profit from activities that exploit the environment and/or people to bear those costs, rather than society or the environment.

19. Reduce the workweek.

We now have unprecedented productivity. To keep one gainfully employed increasingly takes all the more resources. Despite productivity gains, most of us are working longer. On average, it now takes two working adults to maintain the middle class lifestyle that a generation ago a single job could provide. Overworked Americans are more likely to resort to "time-saving," environment-wasting pre-packaged conveniences. Let's share the good jobs and the bounties of increased productivity.¹⁸ Working less means more time for self, family and community even if it means less money for Prozac, counseling and shopping.

20. Identify that unsustainable portion of our economy dependent on growth and convert it to sustainable pursuits.

We can transform developers of farmland and open space into redevelopers of downtowns and ghettos. We can have a healthy economy without the growth of either population or consumption.¹⁹

In summary, human happiness is a better goal than corporate profit.

E. Making Government Work Again

21. Make population and consumption political issues.

A supposed Chinese proverb is: "Unless we change our direction, we are likely to end up where we are going." Society needs to have a full and vigorous debate about population and consumption. These are the root causes of most of our societal problems, not to mention individual, family, and community problems. We must break through fundamentalist thinking that prevents us from talking about these fundamental issues.

22. Spearhead the next capitalist revolution—the sustainability revolution.

At present, capitalism knows no rival. Now is a perfect time to reform it to improve both its fairness and efficiency. Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, and Hunter Lovins estimate that the first industrial revolution made a

Given that corporations enjoy many favors from the public . . . it is appropriate that we require from them a commitment to other things than simply accumulation of capital and maximization of profit.

human being 100 times more productive. They estimate a ten to hundred times improvement in productivity in the next industrial revolution.²⁰ The challenge will be to use ten to one hundred times less energy and materials, and not to succumb to the possibility of using ten to one hundred times more. If we do that—and reduce population—we can all live well on Earth in economic, ecological and personal balance.²¹

23. Enact campaign finance reform.

These reforms can only fully occur if we also reform our political system to control the corrupting influences of large amounts of money. Such reform is possible, and without weakening the First Amendment to the Constitution.

24. Make corporations accountable.²²

Perhaps the key to removing the influence of big money in political campaigns is to amend the Constitution, to again define “person” as a person—a living, breathing human. Only people—not corporations—would have constitutional protections of “persons.” Alternatively, one could extend the legal fiction that corporations are “persons” by making them subject to the death penalty. The decision to not fix the Pinto gas tank—because it would cost more to fix than the expected liability payouts—was murder. Prosecutors could make no case against any particular person or persons (in a human sense) as the decision and action were by the corporate corpus. The Ford Motor Company should have been convicted of murder and executed by dissolution of the corporation and confiscation of its assets. In the future, stockholders would pay more attention to the management of a company.

Given that corporations enjoy many favors from the public—limited liability, perpetual existence, and other protections—it is appropriate that we require from them a commitment to other things than simply accumulation of capital and maximization of profit. Corporations should be required to do justice in the workplace and not harm the environment. Historically, corporate charters used to be granted directly by the legislature and then only for a specific public good deemed worthy of conferring such benefits and only for a specified period of time. After the Civil War corporate charters were issued—in perpetuity—for any legal purpose and by state bureaucracies rather than the legislature.

25. Reverse globalization of trade and finance.

The globalization of the economy and the resultant exaltation of the global corporation, accountable to no one except the bottom line sacrifices the dignity of the individual, the fabric of the community, the function of the environment and the blessings of democracy.²³

In summary, a functioning democracy is vital to any reforms.

Conclusion

There you have it. Twenty-five things to keep Oregon Oregon and keep Earth Earth. Some require a new direction, some return to an old direction. As we seek to change the course of Western Civilization—at least in Oregon—we must remember that it will take time. We must pace ourselves. In the daily course of our lives, none of us will work on all of these reforms. Our own choices of what is most important and where we can be most effective will lead us to emphasize some over others. The important thing is that each of us does something.

So, join Alternatives to Growth Oregon if you are not already a member. If you are, give more money to AGO.

Pick your cause or causes—but not too many of them—and let us get to work. If all of us here and a small fraction of those who believe as we do act we can keep Oregon Oregon.

Andy Kerr is founder and president of Alternatives to Growth Oregon (www.AGOregon.org, 503/222-0282), a membership organization dedicated to bringing about an end to population and consumption growth, and to the promotion of true economic, personal, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth by supporting policies that move Oregon toward sustainability. He is also president of The Larch Company (the western larch has a contrary nature as a deciduous conifer) and writes on and agitates for the environment. He lives in Oregon's Rogue Valley and may be reached at andykerr@AGOregon.org.

As we seek to change the course of Western Civilization—at least in Oregon—we must remember that it will take time.

REFERENCES

- 1 “Survey shows Oregonians don’t support growth.” The Associated Press, January 14, 2000
- 2 “Next 25 years to bring huge growth for Oregon.” The Associated Press, January 3, 2000
- 3 Fodor, Eben. 1998. *The Cost of Growth in Oregon*. Eugene, OR: Fodor & Associates. 2.
- 4 Fodor, Eben. 1999. *Better Not Bigger: How to Take Control of Urban Growth and Improve Your Community*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers. 134

TWENTY-FIVE ACTIONS TO END GROWTH IN OREGON

ANDY KERR, ALTERNATIVES TO GROWTH OREGON

- ⁵ Durning, Alan Thein and Bauman, Yoram. 1998. *Tax Shift: How To Help the Economy, Improve the Environment, and Get the Tax Man off Our Backs*. Seattle, WA: Northwest Environment Watch. 31-74.
- ⁶ Frank, Robert H. 1999. *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess*. New York: The Free Press. 211-226.
- ⁷ Durning and Bauman op. cit., page 58.
- ⁸ Lewin, Tamar. 2000. The Way We Live Now. *New York Times*. May 14. WK3
- ⁹ McKibben, Bill. 1998. *Maybe One: A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single-Child Families*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 17-62.
- ¹⁰ The literature is rich and fascinating:
 - Frank, op. cit.
 - Frank, Robert H. and Cook, Phillip J. 1995. *The Winner-Take-All Society: How More and More Americans Compete for Ever Fewer and Bigger Prizes, Encouraging Economic Waste, Income Inequality, and an Impoverished Cultural Life*. New York: The Free Press.
 - Schor, Juliet B. 1991. *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*. New York: Basic Books
 - Schor, Juliet B. 1998. *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting and the New Consumer*. New York: Basic Books.
 - Rosenblatt, Roger, ed. 1999. *Consuming Desires: Consumption, culture and the Pursuit of Happiness*. Washington, DC: Island Press/Shearwater Books.
- ¹¹ Bouvier, Leon F and Lindsey Grant. 1994. How Many Americans?: Population, Immigration and the Environment. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- ¹² Durning and Crowther, op. cit., pages 11-42.
- ¹³ “Northwest Job Cap Study.” 1999. Seattle, WA: Northwest Policy Center and Northwest Federation of Community Organizations. 3.
- ¹⁴ Thompson, Jeff. 2000. Income Inequity Grows in Oregon: The Rich Get Richer While Most Oregonians Do Worse or No Better (press release). Silverton, OR: Oregon Center for Public Policy.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, page 43.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, page 52.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, page 56.
- ¹⁸ See:
 - Schor 1991, op. cit.
 - Rifkin, Jeremy. 1995. The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons.
- ¹⁹ Daly, Herman E. 1996. Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development. Boston: Beacon Press. 253 pages.
- ²⁰ Hawken, Paul; Amory Lovins; and L. Hunter Lovins. 1999. Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution. New York: Little, Brown. 170
- ²¹ Korten, David C. 1999. The Post-Corporate World: Life After Capitalism. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Kuehler Publishers and West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press
- ²² Korten, David C. 1995. When Corporations Rule the World. West Hartford, Conn.: Kumerian Press.
- ²³ Mander, Jerry and Edward Goldsmith. 1996. The Case Against the Global Economy: And For a Turn Toward the Local. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.