

COMING MONDAY

■ Failing to change the status quo — or to avoid a U.S. default — will result in huge costs for future generations.

EDITORIALS | COMMENTARY | OPINION | LETTERS TO THE EDITOR | POLITICAL CARTOONS | VOICES

THE ENVIRONMENT

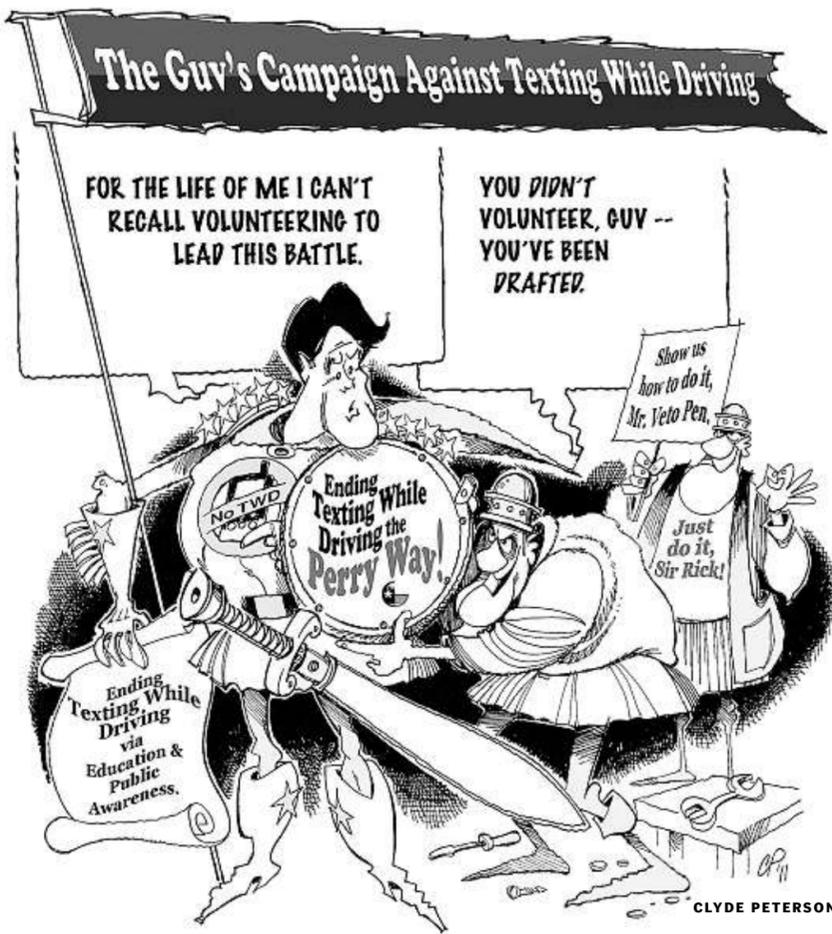


PEDRO MOLINA

Climate data spark battle in Congress

STATE GOVERNMENT

Nothing exceptional about Perry's veto of texting-while-driving bill



CLYDE PETERSON

■ Almost 40 states have banned practice

By CLYDE PETERSON

IT'S easy to see why Gov. Rick Perry would veto the statewide ban on texting while driving. A man who has driven an ideological steamroller clear across Texas while tapping messages about prayer meetings and national vanity campaigns into his smartphone must think mere texting while driving is no difficult matter at all.

Besides, this is clearly one more topic the governor has thoroughly soaked and rinsed in Perrythink. In spite of every report and every suggestion that texting while driving is considered "insanity on wheels" (as a South Dakota legislator put it), and

that the practice accrues more and more death and injury by the day, our governor chooses to cut it some slack. Better to err on the side of not micromanaging adult behavior than to interfere with the natural laws of who is to survive texting drivers and who is not.

The governor likely views vetoing the texting-while-driving bill as just another expression of our vaunted Texas Exceptionalism — exceptional, indeed, given that the number of other states that have banned texting while driving is approaching 40. Exceptional in that the official position of AAA is that all 50 states should have such bans. And exceptional in that in many of those states still lacking statewide bans, numerous cities have of necessity opted for local bans on texting while driving — many of those cities being

right here in Texas.

Even buried in the recent study trotted out by the Governors Highway Safety Commission questioning much of the anti-distracted driving campaigns' efforts, the authors held firm that there should be texting bans for all drivers.

The governor is even exceptionalist among Texas leaders. The Texas attorney general, Greg Abbott, and Texas Department of Public Safety director, Steven C. McCraw, have both gone on the record to make the case to the public that texting while driving is a multifold and unacceptable risk to all. Would that either of them had a governor's resources and profile to push their messages more effectively.

This past April, the Texas Department of Transportation broke out its "Talk, Text, Please see **VETO**, Page B9

Republicans oppose new NOAA service that would provide weather information

By NEAL LANE and ROBERT HARRISS

MOST Texans would agree with Jim Norwine, a geographer and climatologist at Texas A&M-Kingsville, that our state has "problematic" climates and that both private and public decision-makers need the best available climate data and analysis on where we may be heading next month and in years ahead.

Determined to keep the U.S. on the cutting edge of climate data and analysis for decision-making, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has asked Congress to approve a climate services program. Reorganization and streamlining of existing NOAA climate data and science programs will be made accessible to the public via its website, www.climate.gov. This "one-stop shopping" would serve business, the public and officials seeking information on climate variability and change.

The current Texas drought is an example of climate variability that continues to set records and is officially the third-worst in recorded history, according to John Nielsen-Gammon, Texas state climatologist at Texas A&M University. At least half of the state is in an "exceptional drought," the highest level, and many parts of Texas are from 10 inches to 20 inches behind in rainfall. The science and analysis of droughts, floods and heat waves are just a few of the climate extremes that will be studied and reported on by the NOAA Climate Services program.

Climate is based on the statistical analysis of temperature, humidity, rainfall and other weather measurements in a given region over months, seasons and years. State and regional studies of climate have been of enormous value to farmers, energy providers, insurance companies and the public. Climate information informs longer-term decisions on water management, planting of crops, winter heating-oil supplies and many other economic decisions.

Compared with our small neighboring state to the north, Texas invests very modest resources into the collection and analysis of weather and climate data. For example, the Texas state climatologist has a staff of three part-time students. The Oklahoma Climatological Survey has a staff of 48 scientists and technicians and sophisticated data collection in every county in the state.

Fortunately for Texas and the nation, NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco last month submitted a request to create a NOAA Climate Services program to a full hearing of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee. The proposed legislation would enable NOAA to respond more efficiently and effectively to the increasing demand for climate data and services. Lubchenco pointed out that this organizational shift is simply "good government" and would allow NOAA to meet a growing demand for climate services, create increased transparency and collaboration between government agencies and

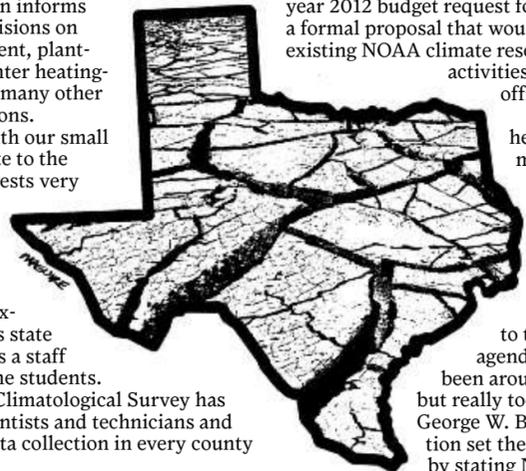
the private sector and support economic innovation in related private-sector industries. The proposed restructuring would affect more than half of the agency she heads, with the goal of streamlining NOAA's five climate service branches into one efficient division with no increase in the budget. The current organizational structure makes it difficult to obtain necessary information and produce climate-related information for end users like the oil-and-gas and agricultural industries.

The NOAA Climate Service concept was formally proposed in February 2010, following several years of studies of alternative approaches. However, given concerns expressed by some members of Congress, primarily Republican members of the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology, NOAA has had to slow its efforts and now awaits consent from Congress. The president's fiscal year 2012 budget request for NOAA includes a formal proposal that would consolidate existing NOAA climate research and service activities into a single-line office.

Lubchenco ended her prepared remarks by reminding the committee that the concept of a climate service within NOAA is not new and not an issue unique to the Democratic agenda. The idea has been around since the 1970s but really took hold when the George W. Bush administration set the wheels in motion by stating NOAA's intent to create the service.

Committee Republicans called NOAA's proposal "politically charged" and accused Lubchenco of breaking the law by moving forward with climate-service implementation without congressional consent. Lubchenco vehemently denied that NOAA was operating outside of its existing authorities. Democrats lauded the NOAA proposals and highlighted the economic and severe weather impacts of failing to approve the climate service reorganization. Committee Chairman Ralph Hall, R-Texas, noted that this hearing was just the

Please see **CLIMATE**, Page B9



CLIMATE: Partisanship delaying data service

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B8 first on the topic, signaling that additional hearings may be scheduled as Congress weighs whether to approve the reorganization in the fiscal year 2012 appropriations bills.

The outlook for approval of the climate service in the fiscal 2012 appropriations bills is bleak, with Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., chairman of the House Commerce, Justice, Science Appropriations Subcommittee, largely deferring the decision to Science Committee Chairman Hall.

In sharp contrast to the Congress, the Western Gov-

ernors' Association (WGA) and NOAA announced a joint agreement June 30 for improving the development and delivery of climate science and services to Western states.

In the midst of a record-breaking season for extreme drought, flood, wildfire and severe storms, this timely agreement will increase collaboration and boost existing efforts to ensure Western states and the U.S. Pacific islands are better able to plan for these types of natural hazards. WGA includes Republican and Democratic governors from 19 Western

states, including Texas, and three U.S. Pacific islands.

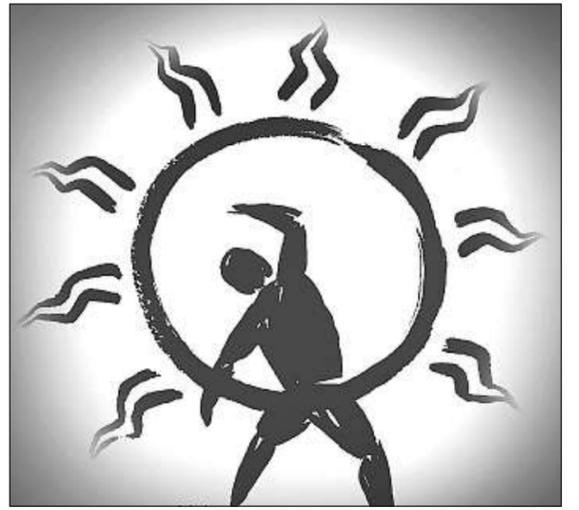
Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire, WGA's vice chair, said, "A good working relationship with NOAA in providing the science and information services states need will help us all build healthy and resilient communities and economies."

We ask all Texans to let our congressional delegation know that climate services should not be a victim of partisan debates.

The recognition of the importance of climate data and analysis in America can be traced to the late 18th

century. One of our nation's first applied climatologists was Thomas Jefferson, our third president, who kept detailed records of weather and climate. It's time to move forward with a 21st-century climate service that will meet the needs of Texas and the nation.

Lane is the Malcolm Gillis University Professor and senior fellow of the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University; Harriss is president of the Houston Advanced Research Center (HARC) in The Woodlands.



DEAN ROHRER

MENTAL HEALTH

A salute to Obama for shift on suicides

■ Servicemen deserve letters of condolence

By **BETSY SCHWARTZ**

MENTAL Health America of Greater Houston salutes President Obama for reversing a long-standing policy of not sending presidential letters of condolence to the families of service members who have died by suicide while serving their country.

This contemporary policy change sends a strong message that individuals dealing with the stressors of combat and who die by suicide are not to be considered weak. They have served our country with courage and patriotism and deserve to be recognized for their service.

Our national organization, Mental Health America, has long advocated for a reversal of the condolence-letter policy. Its board of directors passed a resolution in January 2010 urging the change, stating that "the lack of acknowledgment and condolence from the president can leave these families with an emotional vacuum and a feeling that somehow the sacrifices of their loved one may not have been as great as others who died while in the military."

One service member's suicide is too many. As advocates, it is our hope that the number of military suicides will significantly decrease and that service members will more confidently adopt a new way of thinking in order to protect their personal mental health.

The stress and trauma associated with daily military life and combat are normal, but can be emotionally, psy-



CHRONICLE

TROUBLED SERVICEMEN:

Two members of a platoon led by U.S. Army 1st Lt. Ryan Presnal, of Tomball, committed suicide after returning from Iraq.

chologically and physically impairing for some individuals, especially those who forgo treatment. Fortunately, each military branch has programs designed to deal with the mental health problems of their soldiers. We hope that through these and other programs, service members will soon feel more assured that they can get the help they need to heal their mental wounds of war without negative consequences.

Suicide is traumatic. This policy change is an important step that can potentially offer greater hope of understanding and eliminate the stigma associated with mental health issues and reduce the number of soldier suicides.

Schwartz is president and CEO of Mental Health America of Greater Houston.



CHRONICLE

REACHING OUT: Sandra and Jeff Presnal started Armor of God Military Ministries, an outreach ministry for service members, after their son lost two members of his platoon to suicide.

ENERGY



SMILEY N. POOL : CHRONICLE

IDLED: Jim Noe, senior vice president and general counsel for Hercules Offshore, stands in front of a group of drilling rigs. A report last week indicated drilling in the Gulf of Mexico could support 430,000 jobs by 2013 if the permitting process was improved.

The Gulf can provide jobs

Let's fix the permit process and put thousands to work

By **JIM NOE**

FOR many Americans, it's shaping up to be quite a summer. Job numbers are not ticking up as expected, the economy seems to still be sputtering along and gas prices are sitting near all-time highs right when families like to drive somewhere for vacation.

Now imagine that you work in the Obama administration. You're presented with evidence that a little bureaucratic streamlining brought on by a rethink of policy priorities could create tens of thousands of jobs within three years while simultaneously improving the country's energy security. And then you're shown polls demonstrating that Americans would support your initiative. How quickly would you act to make this idea happen?

The path forward to creating jobs, promoting economic growth and improving America's energy security goes right through the Gulf of Mexico, where

efforts to generate fossil-fuel production in both shallow and deep waters have been virtually hamstrung since the Macondo blowout of April 2010. Unfortunately, the administration's energy policies — encapsulated by its ever-changing approach to offshore drilling — have frustrated efforts to more productively use our nation's vast domestic resources while our country transitions to a blended energy portfolio geared toward next-generation, sustainable sources of fuel.

According to a study released last week by the National Ocean Industries Association and the American Petroleum Institute,

total employment supported by a healthy Gulf of Mexico oil and natural gas industry could exceed 430,000 jobs by 2013 — an increase of 77 percent, or 180,000 jobs, over the low levels of 2010 when activity in the Gulf was brought to its knees by the deep-water moratorium and a drastic slow-down in the issuance of permits for shallow-water operations.

The catch is, the study's projected employment growth is contingent upon the ability of regulators in the Department of the Interior to once again issue permits for safe and responsible drilling in a timely and efficient manner — something that hasn't been seen since last April. In other words, failure to improve the government's offshore-permitting process will leave jobs on the table and economic activity bottled up at a time when the country is scrambling to create work and stimulate growth.

In Texas alone, spending on offshore oil and gas development dropped nearly 17 percent from 2008 to 2010, to \$7.3 billion. If the permitting process gets back into shape, the report predicts that spending would increase to \$12.5 billion in 2013, which would result in an increase of 32,060 direct jobs by 2013, with indirect jobs growing to over 108,000.

But whether that regulatory process improves is a big if at present. Currently we import 9.4 million barrels of oil every day, sending nearly \$1 trillion out of the country each day to buy foreign oil. And as we dawdle and debate today over where to drill, our reliance on foreign suppliers grows stronger.

We now preside over a historic loss of drilling rigs in U.S. waters, jeopardizing our ability to produce oil and gas well into the future. Each drilling rig costs hundreds of millions of dollars; new deep-water drill ships cost more than a billion. Naturally, companies balk at committing this capital amid a regulatory environment where general hostility to the

energy industry is the only real certainty.

Yet while White House policies scare away energy producers, polls of American consumers are saying something altogether different. A CNN poll from April shows 69 percent of Americans favor increased offshore drilling. The fact is, Americans are tired of leaving the country's energy security vulnerable to overseas turmoil over which they have no control.

In the near-term, Americans may be spending long weekends at home rather than favorite vacation spots. But in the longer term, our dependence on imported fuel means the next time foreign supply constraints hit the U.S. consumer, we will still have no back-up plan other than tapping our strategic petroleum reserves — hardly a sustainable approach to controlling our energy future.

It is hard to understand why the Obama administration would not act decisively to seize the benefits of an improved permitting process. As the NOIA/API study reveals, thousands of good-paying jobs sit on hold right now thanks to the government's regulatory sluggishness. The Gulf is also poised to make a major contribution to America's energy security for years to come, but only if the regulatory climate improves.

This is low-hanging fruit for the Obama administration — substantial job growth and economic improvement that benefits America's energy security is within reach. All that is needed is to fix the permitting process in the Gulf right now.

Noe is senior vice president, general counsel and chief compliance officer of Hercules Offshore Inc., the largest shallow-water drilling company in the Gulf of Mexico. He is also executive director of the Shallow Water Energy Security Coalition, an advocacy group comprising shallow-water exploration and development companies, drilling contractors and service companies.

VETO: Let's help with the education effort

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B8 Crash" program for Distracted Driving Awareness Month. A good but limited effort — one burst and it was done. Can anyone say, how about boosting TxDOT's "Talk, Text, Crash" campaign to a year-round, "Don't Mess With Texas" scaled effort?

And then we come back to the effort by the Legislature, where political polar opposites, Rep. Tom Craddick, R-Midland, and Sen. Judith Zaffarini, D-Laredo, guided the bill (HB 242) creating a statewide ban on texting while driving through both houses and sent it to the governor's desk — where it found logic and common sense taking a holiday, but

the governor's veto pen at the ready.

Zap! What could have been a valuable tool for preventing injury, saving lives and would have served as a strong underpinning for the no-texting-while-driving message was snuffed as if blindsided by a texting driver.

The one commendable suggestion in the governor's veto message was his encouragement of going after texting while driving with education and public awareness efforts, and he said all of us who have been working so hard to curb texting while driving should work with our state and local leaders to accomplish our goals.

This is such a commendable suggestion, in fact, that this activist is picking the governor himself as his state leader with whom to work.

The governor should be easily the source of the best ideas and means of conducting all the education and all the campaigns of public awareness it will take to dissuade deadly and reckless texting while driving in Texas.

Surely we can look forward to seeing the many public agencies the governor plans to enlist in this effort, and to hearing the goals he sets out for those agencies and to hearing his brisk orders for immediate and full-tilt actions to be taken.

And knowing how proud the governor is of his private-sector partnerships, connections and pull, we can be sure he'll be contacting them and enlisting their intense and generous statewide participation and support as well.

If the governor and the governor's people can promote this undertaking with even a modicum of the enthusiasm and skill they've been investing in their self-promotion, texting while driving in Texas, look out! Make your move, Governor — we're right behind you.

Peterson is a former editorial cartoonist for the Chronicle.