

Carrying guns to get message out

By Steven Dubois
Associated Press

PORTLAND (AP) — The leader of a 41-day standoff at a national wildlife refuge in Oregon testified that he orchestrated the takeover to take “a hard stand” against the federal government’s control of public lands and said the occupiers would not be successful unless they carried guns.

Ammon Bundy’s two days of testimony have taken jurors from his family’s high-profile 2014 standoff with federal agents in Nevada to this winter’s occupation of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, revealing the connections between the two. Bundy asserted the Nevada standoff triggered the activism that led him to Oregon.

Though U.S. District Judge Anna Brown has tried to keep jurors focused on the criminal charges, the charismatic Bundy has repeatedly tried to use the platform to amplify his message that Western states must win more control over vast federal land holdings.

Bundy, 41, is among seven people accused of conspiring to impede federal workers from doing their jobs at the refuge during the occupation that lasted nearly six weeks. Four of the seven, including Bundy, are also charged with possessing a gun in a federal facility. If convicted, they face years in prison.

Bundy said he did not conspire with anyone in the weeks prior to the Jan. 2 occupation. He met a group at a restaurant 30 miles from the refuge and suggested they take it over during a rally supporting two ranchers set to return to prison for arson.

“I proposed to them that we go into the refuge, and we basically take possession of it, and we give these lands back to the people,” Bundy said.

He said he wasn’t armed on the refuge but acknowledged telling others to carry guns. Otherwise, the occupation had no chance of success, he said.

“Without the guns, they would have come out in a paddy wagon and put us in zip-tie handcuffs,” Bundy said of authorities. “We would never have been able to tell people why we were there.”

Bundy testified that interfering with federal workers was never a consideration. He wanted to generate media coverage of the treatment of Dwight and Steven Hammond, father-and-son ranchers convicted of setting fire to public land, and his belief that the U.S. Constitution gives the federal government very limited right to own land within a state.

“This issue is the issue,” Bundy told the judge when she tried to limit his testimony about the Constitution. “This is why we went onto the refuge and did what we did.”

Bundy maintains he tried legally to keep the Hammonds out of prison before deciding he had no choice but to take what he repeatedly called a “hard stand.”

Prosecutors contend the conspiracy began two months before the occupation, when Bundy met an Oregon sheriff on Nov. 5 to discuss the plight of the Hammonds. Bundy said that was not true.

He testified that a police official helped ease tensions during a 2014 standoff with federal agents at his father, Cliven Bundy’s Nevada ranch. The federal agents tried to round up the elder Bundy’s cattle but backed off as they faced a large armed group.

A video played for jurors showed the police official appearing to broker the deal that allowed Cliven Bundy’s cattle to go free. Ammon Bundy said that official protected his family, and he figured Harney County Sheriff Dave Ward in Oregon would do the same for the Hammonds. But he said the discussion with Ward got no results.

Project aims to save dwindling old-growth

CENTRAL POINT (AP) — A project to protect some of the last remaining stands of old-growth oak savannas is underway in southwestern Oregon.

The two-year, \$1.28 million project is treating 1,400 acres of public and private land in and around the Upper and Lower Table Rocks for oak habitat restoration, *The Mail Tribune* reported.

“It’s not about creating a museum piece,” said Darren Borgias of The Nature Conservancy. “It’s restoring a habitat that can continue to evolve.”

The Nature Conservancy and Klamath Bird Observatory have joined with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest service and other federal agencies in the project intended to protect trees that can be more than 200 years old. Experts say only about 10 percent of the low-elevation oak savannas that several hundred years ago stretched from northern California to British Columbia still exist.

The restoration work includes reducing the threat of high-intensity wildfires.

“You’re going to have fire,” Borgias said. “The question is, how do you want your fire? To sustain the leg-acy trees or to kill them?”

The Rogue Valley has pockets of old oaks. Areas around Agate Lake and in the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument have significant stands, as do the Table Rocks.

The oaks are important for various species, particularly the Lewis’ woodpecker, which nests in cavities in the trees.

“Lewis’ woodpeckers have been slowly blinking out in the Western states along with the big oaks,” said botanist Kristi Mergenthaler of the Southern Oregon Land Conservancy.

The restoration effort in and around the Upper and Lower Table Rocks area last year included removing brush that posed a fire danger. Low-intensity prescribed fires are planned for this fall and spring.

“There’s more urgency to safe-harbor this habitat through upcoming climate change,” Borgias said. “This way, these oaks can lifeboat their way into the future.”

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