

Pardoned ranchers arrive home

By Andrew Selsky
Associated Press

SALEM (AP) — Father and son ranchers, who were the focus of a battle about public lands and were freed from prison after receiving a presidential pardon, were welcomed home Wednesday in Oregon by relatives and horseback riders carrying American flags.

A lawyer for the family of Steven and Dwight Hammond said they remain focused on their attempt to restore grazing rights on Bureau of Land Management acreage.

Friction between the family and federal officials, and the sentencing of two members to five-year prison terms under an anti-terrorism statute, triggered the takeover of a nearby federal wildlife refuge by right-wing militants in 2016 that grabbed world headlines.

“We’re exploring potential civil suits on behalf of the family to make sure they have their rights over land restored to them, that they’re protected from more harassment and overzealousness of government agencies,” attorney Morgan Philpot told The Associated Press.

The family also wants a dialogue between ranchers, politicians, federal agencies and bureaucrats, he said.

A news conference that had been set with family members outside the high-desert town of Burns was canceled when their convoy was delayed by a roadblock set up to allow a wide-load vehicle to pass.

“The family has already gone through enough. They were tired and wanted to go home and spend time with family,” Philpot said. “Perhaps it was sheer coincidence that the oversized load was coming through the same road we were using.”

The local BLM office did not immediately return a phone call or email seeking comment.

Earlier in the day, Steven Hammond and his father Dwight stepped from a private jet and into the arms of family members at a municipal airport outside the high desert community of Burns. A day earlier they were pardoned by President Donald Trump and released from a federal prison near Los Angeles.

“We’re going to do a lot of decompressing and get back to our families,” Steven Hammond said.

Just 25 miles (40 kilometers) away is Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, which was taken over in 2016 by armed protesters angered by the sentences given to the Hammonds.

The standoff lasted 41

days, ending after occupation leaders Ammon and Ryan Bundy were arrested and LaVoy Finicum was killed by police.

The occupiers, who believe federal control of public lands violates the Constitution, insisted the Hammonds were victimized by federal overreach.

Steven Hammond thanked Trump and many people on Wednesday for writing to him and his father while they were in prison.

“We received thousands of letters. There’s a time you get to that point where a letter means a lot,” Steven Hammond said, his voice choking up in video posted on Twitter by *The Oregonian/OregonLive*.

Some environmentalists see a pattern in the way Trump is approaching public lands, which comprise almost half of the U.S. West, and have linked the pardons to his position on the issue.

Witnesses testified that a 2001 arson fire occurred shortly after Steven Hammond and his hunting party illegally slaughtered deer on BLM property. The fire destroyed all evidence of the game violations, the U.S. attorney’s office said.

The jury also convicted Steven Hammond for a 2006 blaze that prosecutors said began when he started several back fires, violating a burn ban, to save his winter feed after lightning started numerous fires nearby.

Federal anti-terrorism law called for mandatory five-year sentences for the 2012 convictions. A federal judge said those sentences wouldn’t fit the crime, and instead sentenced Dwight Hammond to three months in prison and Steven Hammond to a year and one day.

A federal appeals court in October 2015 ordered them to be resentenced to the mandatory prison time.



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