Heroes or criminals? Trump pardons two Oregon ranchers

By Andrew Selsky
Associated Press

Rugged individualists to some, dangerous arsonists to others, a father and son who were convicted of intentionally setting fires on public land in Oregon were pardoned Tuesday by President Donald Trump.

The move came years after the convictions of Dwight and Steven Hammond, part of a family in the high desert of eastern Oregon known for its generosity and community contributions.

"Our family is grateful to the president and all who worked to make this possible," the Hammond family said in a statement.

Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy, a well-known figure in the battle over public land, welcomed the pardons, saying the Hammonds were victims of federal overreach.

"Now we've finally got a president of the United States who is paying attention to what is going on," Bundy said.

Jamie Rappaport Clark, president of the group Defenders of Wildlife, countered that the Hammonds were convicted of arson, a serious crime.

"Whatever prompted President Trump to pardon them, we hope that it is not seen as an encouragement to those who might use violence to seize federal property and threaten federal employees in the West," Clark said.

Federal prosecutors painted sinister portraits of the Hammonds at their trial.

Witnesses testified that a 2001 arson fire occurred shortly after Steven Hammond and his hunting party illegally slaughtered deer on federal Bureau of Land Management property.

One said Steven Hammond handed out matches with instructions to "light up the whole country," and another testified that Hammond barely escaped the roaring flames.

The fire burned 139 acres (56 hectares) of public land and 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.

The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 called for mandatory five-year sentences for the convictions. But U.S. District Judge Michael R. Hogan said such a lengthy sentence "would not meet any idea I have of justice, proportionality ... it would be a sentence which would shock the conscience to me."

Hogan instead sentenced Dwight Hammond to three months in prison and Steven Hammond to a year and one day. However, in October 2015, a federal appeals court ordered them to be resentenced to the mandatory prison time.

The new sentences became a controversial issue for those who oppose federal control of public lands, leading to the armed occupation of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon for 41 days in 2016.

One occupier was shot dead by Oregon State Police. They say he reached for a pistol at a roadblock.

The U.S. attorney for Oregon, Billy Williams, justified the mandatory sentences, saying they're "intended to be long enough to deter those like the Hammonds who disregard the law and place firefighters and others in jeopardy." Williams declined to comment on the pardons.

Dozens of armed people, many from out of state, who occupied the refuge near the Hammond ranch said the father and son were victims of federal overreach. They changed the name of the refuge to Harney County Resource Center, reflecting their belief that the federal government has only a limited right to own property within a state.

Ammon and Ryan Bundy, two sons of Cliven Bundy, and five other defendants were acquitted in 2016 by a federal jury in Portland on charges stemming from the takeover.

In a statement Tuesday, White House press secretary Sarah Sanders called the five-year sentences for the Hammonds "unjust."

"Justice is overdue for Dwight and Steven Hammond," she said.

Lyle Hammond, another of Dwight Hammond's sons, said Tuesday that his father and brother have been released from a federal prison south of Los Angeles but he didn't know their whereabouts.

Republican U.S. Rep. Greg Walden of Oregon said Trump's action is "a win for justice, and an acknowledgement of our unique way of life in the high desert, rural West."

Oregon Wild, which works to protect and restore Oregon wildlands, wildlife and waters, sees a darker impact from the pardon.

"From the Bundys to logging and oil companies, special interests are working with the Trump administration to dismantle America's public lands heritage, and this will be viewed as a victory in that effort," spokesman Arran Robertson said.

Les Zaitz/The Oregonian via AP
Rancher Dwight Hammond greets protesters outside his Burns home in January 2016.

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Oregon in Brief

From wire reports

Tire from freeway crashes into attic of Oregon home

PENDLETON — Elmer Emmons heard what sounded like a tree limb striking the roof of the Pendleton home he's renting.

He thought his grandkids might have knocked something over. He returned to sleep.

The East Oregonian newspaper reports Emmons later discovered a large tire had crashed through the roof.

The house is about 100 feet from Interstate 84, where a crash had occurred. But the house isn't visible from the freeway and the tire had to careen over a hill, over two wire fences and through a tree to land in the attic.

Trooper who fired at motorist in Eugene cleared

EUGENE — An Oregon State Police trooper who fired his weapon at a vehicle in west Eugene June 18 has been identified as Mark Chaffin.

The Register-Guard reported Tuesday that the 1990 to 1997 dark-colored Mazda Miata or similar convertible and its driver have not been located.

Police say Chaffin attempted to pull over the speeding vehicle in the Bethel area with a missing rear bumper about 1 a.m. Police say the driver didn't stop, and instead drove down the street, made a U-turn and drove at the trooper.

Police say Chaffin fired his gun at the car, but the driver sped away.

The case remains under investigation.

Chaffin was placed on administrative leave following the incident but was cleared to return to duty July 1.

Junction City building explodes; racial slur, symbol found

JUNCTION CITY, Ore. — A building northwest of Eugene in Junction City exploded and burst into flames.

The Register-Guard reports that authorities, including the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and Junction City police are investigating the cause of the early Monday explosion and fire.

Authorities say a swastika and a racial slur were found spray painted at the scene.

Junction City Police Chief Bob Morris says the cause of the fire is suspicious. Authorities on Monday had not been able to contact the building's owners.

State business records show Irene and Devon Huntley bought the building in 2015. Morris said they were renovating the building, which had been used as an insurance office, to become a restaurant.

Health officials suspect measles case in Washington state

Health officials say a child in southern Washington state is suspected of having measles contracted from someone in the Portland-area where two cases were found.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reports Clark County Public Health officials warn that Vancouver, Washington, residents may been exposed to the virus at three retail centers in the city late last month.

Someone with the virus entered a child care center in Gresham, Oregon, resulting in a second case being identified last week.

Multnomah County health officials say there are about 40 people known to have been exposed who have not been immunized.

The virus can spread through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Symptoms, which can sometimes take weeks to appear, include coughing, fever, a runny nose and rash.

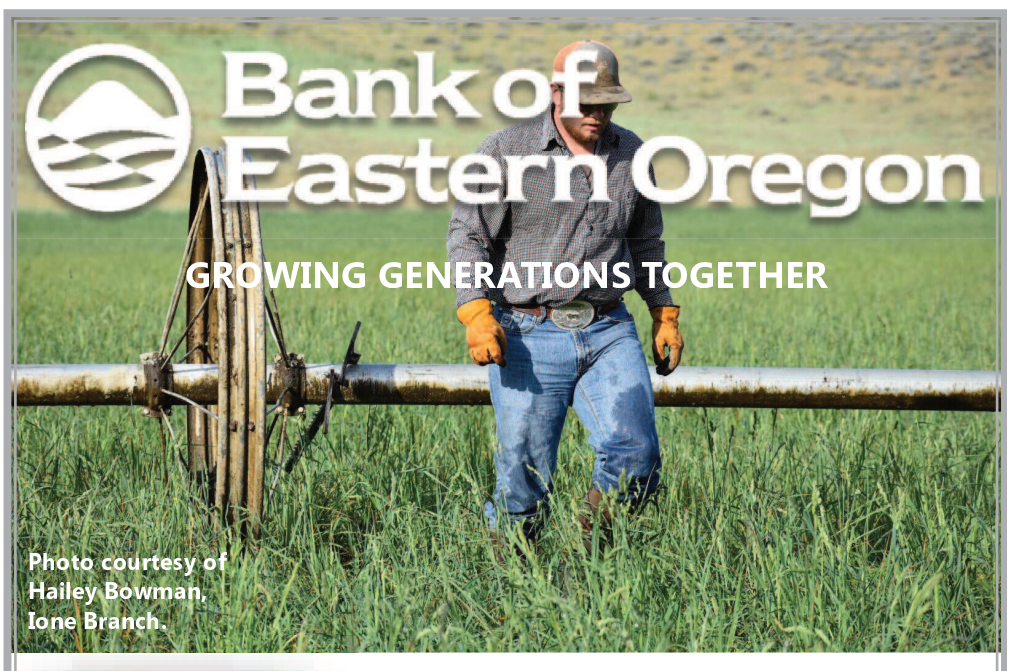

Photo courtesy of Hailey Bowman, Ione Branch.

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