

Standoff

Occupiers want federal lands turned over to ranchers, loggers

BURNS, Ore. (AP) — A leader of the small, armed group of people occupying a remote national wildlife preserve in Oregon said Tuesday they will go home when a plan is in place to turn over management of federal lands to locals.

Ammon Bundy told reporters at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge that ranchers, loggers and farmers should have control of federal land — a common refrain in a decades-long fight over public lands in the West.

“It is our goal to get the logger back to logging, the rancher back to ranching,” said the son of Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy, who was involved in a high-profile 2014 standoff with the government over grazing rights.

The younger Bundy’s anti-government group is critical of federal land stewardship, but environmentalists and others say U.S. officials should keep control for the broadest possible benefit to business, recreation and the environment.

The armed group seized the refuge’s headquarters Saturday night. Roughly 20 people bundled in camouflage, earmuffs



Rick Bowmer/The Associated Press

Members of the group occupying the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters stand guard Jan. 4 near Burns, Ore. The group calls itself Citizens for Constitutional Freedom and has sent a “demand for redress” to local, state and federal officials. The armed anti-government group took over the remote national wildlife refuge in Oregon as part of a decades-long fight over public lands in the West.

and cowboy hats seem to be centered around a complex of buildings on the 300-square-mile preserve in the high desert. As of Wednesday, federal officials had not taken overt steps to remove or arrest them.

Bundy’s stated goals didn’t set well with American Indians, who have denounced the occupation and asserted a superior claim to the property.

The leader of an Oregon Indian tribe whose ancestral property is being occupied by the armed group opposed to federal land policy says the activists aren’t welcome and need to leave.

Burns Paiute Tribal Chair Charlotte Rodrique told reporters Wednesday that the tribe is concerned about damage to cultural artifacts. She says the

group is “desecrating one of our sacred sites.”

Rodrique said she “had to laugh” at the group’s goal, because she knew Bundy wasn’t talking about giving the land back to the tribe.

“We have no sympathy for those who are trying to take the land from its rightful owners,” she said.

Rodrique said the Paiute

people spent winters in the area before settlers, ranchers and trappers arrived.

She says the tribe signed a federal treaty in 1868 and expected the government to honor the agreement to protect their interests, though the U.S. Senate never approved it.

Bundy’s anti-government group is critical of federal land stewardship. But environmentalists and others say U.S. officials should keep control for the broadest possible benefit to business, recreation and the environment.

Randy Eardley, a Bureau of Land Management spokesman, said the group’s call for land ownership transfer didn’t make sense.

“It is frustrating when I hear the demand that we return the land to the people, because it is in the people’s hands,” Eardley said. “Everybody in the United States owns that land. ... We manage it the best we can for its owners, the people, and whether it’s for recreating, for grazing, for energy and mineral development.”

Bundy said the group felt it had the support of the local community, and had originally

said the group would leave if told to do so by the community. But the county sheriff has told the group to go home, and many locals don’t want them around, fearing they may bring trouble. A community meeting was scheduled for later Wednesday, after the Capital Press deadline.

The group, calling itself Citizens for Constitutional Freedom, said it wants an inquiry into whether the government is forcing ranchers off their land after Dwight Hammond and his son, Steven, reported back to prison Monday.

The Hammonds, who have distanced themselves from the group, were convicted of arson three years ago and served no more than a year. A judge later ruled that the terms fell short of minimum sentences requiring them to serve about four more years.

Such land disputes date back decades in the West. In the 1970s, Nevada and other states pushed for local control in what was known as the Sagebrush Rebellion. Supporters wanted more land for cattle grazing, mining and timber harvesting.

Hammonds will seek pardon from Obama

The Associated Press

An attorney for two Oregon ranchers whose impending prison sentences led an armed group to take over a national wildlife refuge says they will seek clemency from the president.

Kendra M. Matthews, a lawyer for Dwight and Steven Hammond, said



Dwight Hammond



Steven Hammond

Monday that the father and son will ask President Barack Obama to pardon them. They were convicted of arson for setting fires on federal land in 2001 and 2006 and served some prison time.

A judge said in October that their terms were too short and ordered them back to prison. Matthews reiterated that the Hammonds intend to surrender Monday to begin serving their terms.

Their sentences have been a rallying cry for the group who say they ultimately want to turn over the refuge land to local authorities so people can use it free of U.S. oversight.

Oregon Cattlemen’s Association criticizes militia takeover

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

Add the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association to the list of groups that don’t approve of the militia takeover of a federal building south of Burns.

In a prepared statement Jan. 4, OCA President John O’Keeffe noted that Harney County ranchers have been “very resourceful” in working with federal agencies on wildlife issues in particular.

“Furthermore, OCA does not support illegal activity taken against the government. This includes militia takeover of government property, such as the Malheur Wildlife Refuge.”



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press

Contrary to the anti-government militia now claiming to act on their behalf, Harney County, Ore., ranchers voluntarily signed sage-grouse habitat conservation agreements with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Services in spring 2014.

However, OCA Executive Director Jerome Rosa said the organization continues to support Burns-area ranchers Dwight and Steven Hammond, who reported to federal prison Monday to serve additional time for burning BLM land. The OCA believes their resenting was a “classic case of double jeopardy” and is calling for clemency.

The self-described militia members are led by Ammon Bundy, who took part in the 2014 armed standoff at the Nevada ranch of his father, Cliven Bundy, over the family’s non-payment of federal grazing fees. The

younger Bundy and fellow believers arrived in Burns vowing to “support” the Hammonds.

They took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters during the New Year’s holiday week-end when it was closed and vacant.

The militia members appear to have few if any ties to the case or to the local area.

Ironically, as O’Keeffe referenced, Harney County ranchers worked extensively with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other local, state and federal agencies on improving hab-

itat for greater sage grouse.

The voluntary conservation agreements signed by county ranchers set a standard for habitat protection on private property throughout the West and are credited with keeping sage grouse off the federal endangered species list in 2015.

A county rancher, Tom Sharp, coined the phrase that summed up the collaboration: “What’s good for the bird is good for the herd.”

O’Keeffe said the OCA is circulating an online petition asking the White House to review the Hammonds’ case.



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