



Rick Bowmer/Associated Press

Members of the group occupying the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters stand guard Monday, Jan. 4, 2016, 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.

'No, we do not approve of the armed men who took over the refuge'

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Judging from more than 120,000 YouTube views of his speech and even-handed editorial response from the largest news organizations, Walden and others who represent, live in and work in the rural West appear to have gained the nation's attention.

The message: No, we do not approve of the armed men who took over the refuge. But the underlying frustration and anger at federal land management and loss of economic opportunity is real.

So now what? Walden said he's discussed such issues with the Republican leadership, but it's unclear how much can be accomplished in the current political atmosphere.

On Wednesday, the House voted 253-166 to overturn the EPA's "Waters of the U.S." rule, which farmers and ranchers say gives the feds control over what Walden called "every stock pond and intermittent ditch."

Walden said the vote sends a "very clear message" to the Obama administration about environmental "over-reach."

The Senate approved a similar measure in November, but the White House has threatened to veto it. Congress is unlikely to assemble the two-thirds majorities required to override a veto, the Wall Street Journal reported.

Meanwhile, Walden said it's unlikely federal land will be turned over to the states or counties, as many in the West favor.

But he and others said a number of incremental changes would help matters. For starters, the statute requiring the five-year mandatory minimum sentence for Dwight and Steven Hammond, the Harney County ranchers at the center of the issue, could be revised, Walden said.

He said the statute was written after the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City and was aimed at acts of domestic terrorism that damage federal property. The fires set by the Hammonds burned acreage managed by the BLM. "But in Oregon, the punishment doesn't fit this crime," he said.

The idea received support at the recent American Farm Bureau Federation convention in Orlando, Fla.

Delegates approved a policy recommendation that Congress prohibit prosecution of farmers and ranchers under federal anti-terrorism statutes for common agricultural practices, like setting back burns to protect their property from wildfires.

If this threat isn't neutralized, it will have a "chilling effect" on farm practices among growers

who fear facing mandatory minimum prison sentences, said Barry Bushue, Oregon Farm Bureau president.

The American Farm Bureau Federation has long been engaged with congressional leaders about problems with fire management and reduced grazing on federal lands to seek a legislative fix, Bushue said.

Zippy Duvall of Georgia, who was elected AFBF president during the convention, said federal land management agencies should find common ground with ranchers instead of behaving like "bullies."

"Everybody needs to step back from it to look for solutions," he said. "With every challenge, there should be an opportunity to find solutions."

Walden, the only Republican among Oregon's congressional delegation, said President Obama could defuse tension by backing away from proposals to establish an Owyhee Canyonlands national monument or wilderness area on 2.5 million acres in Malheur County, in Oregon's southeast corner.

County residents say the designation would cover more than 40 percent of the county, would eliminate grazing on federal land and decimate the cattle industry.

"The community is beside themselves," Walden said. "They're being told either cut a deal with the enviros or have it shoved down their throat."

Walden said he hopes to tell the president, "If you do this, it will put gas on the fire for no good reason."

He and others say a barrage of litigation against logging, ranching and mining is encouraged by a process that pays legal fees to environmental groups when

they prevail on even a single point of a lawsuit.

Walden said environmental groups have already shut down the timber industry and now want to get cattle off the range. "It's a pretty cold-hearted strategy," he said.

Walden said the administration and Congress need to realize that rural poverty and inner-city poverty are quite similar, brought on by a loss of opportunity.

"If they understood the rate of poverty and the rate of despair in our rural communities, in rural Oregon, maybe they'd go, 'Gosh there's a problem we need to address,'" Walden said.

Retired Harney County rancher Bill Wilber said he welcomes the renewed attention to the area's problems and hopes federal agencies will resume a partnership role with ranchers, loggers and others.

Wilber was on a steering committee that met 39 times to hammer out greater sage grouse habitat conservation plans on private property. The Harney County agreements between ranchers and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service became a model that kept the sage grouse off the endangered species list in 2015, and the collaboration was widely praised.

But Wilber said the BLM's subsequent sage grouse plan on land it manages, and on which many ranchers graze cattle, is much more restrictive than in the past.

"We busted our butts and did the right thing for the bird, and get screwed in the end as if we hadn't done anything," he said.

"I would submit the rancher is the ultimate environmentalist," Wilber said. "If they don't take care of that ground, that grass, that water, they'll be out of business."

BLM creates 'study after study' and 'haystacks of regulation' in anticipation of litigation

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The decline of Pacific Northwest timber industry is an old story, but rural residents point out that nothing has replaced it, economically. The government's role is borne out by statistics: In Oregon, the federal government manages 60 percent of the state's forestland but produces only 12 percent of annual timber harvest, according to the Oregon Forest Resources Institute.

Harney County's population stood at 7,126 in 2014, a 4 percent drop since the 2010 U.S. Census. Since 1980, when the population was 8,314 and the job losses began, the county has lost nearly 1,200 people.

Those remaining represent an aging demographic, as young people seek opportunity elsewhere. As of 2014, 22 percent of county residents were 65 or older, compared to 16 percent statewide.

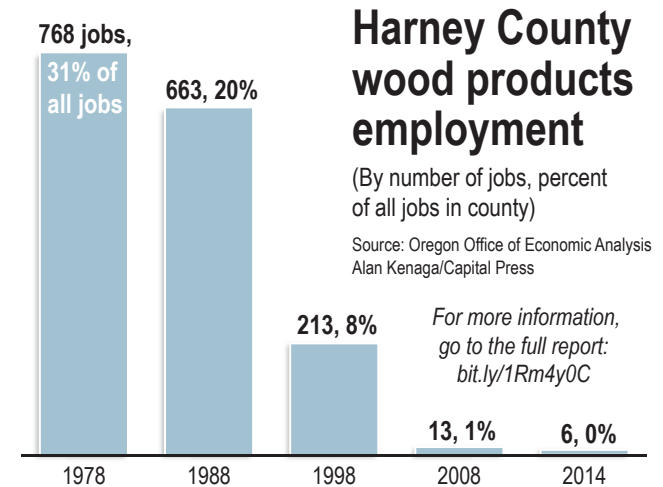
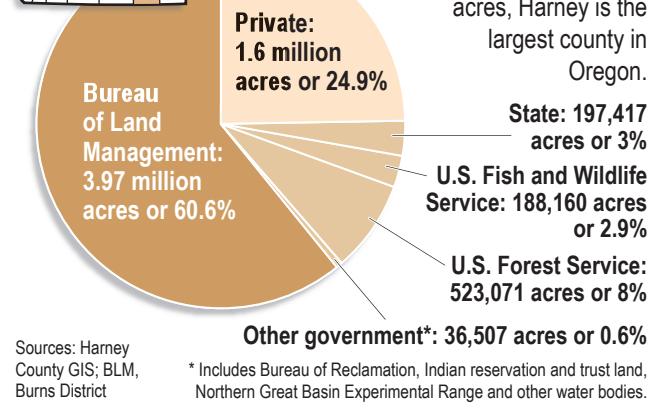
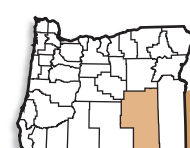
The county unemployment rate was 7.3 percent in November 2015, compared to the statewide average of 5.7 percent.

Bill Wilber, a retired rancher in Harney County, said a drumbeat of government action or proposals involving the federal EPA, BLM, state Department of Environmental Quality, sage grouse, "waters of the U.S." and other issues is tough for residents to take.

"It's continued rules and regulations that do everything to make it more difficult to make a living, to pay your bills, educate your kids, pay your mortgage and lead a good life," Wilber said.

State Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, whose district includes Harney County, said the actions of the "Bundy bunglers" who took over the wildlife refuge should not diminish the "incredible problems" that dog rural residents.

Bentz said the Forest Service spends its budget fighting fires instead of preparing timber sales, and the BLM creates "study after study" and



"haystacks of regulation" in anticipation of litigation. The complexity of management rules becomes "crazily exaggerated," he said.

"Pretty soon nothing happens because the land managers are so busy trying to create a plan that's bulletproof, and fail," he said.

Meanwhile, struggling rural business owners are faced with such things as a state proposal to raise the minimum wage, Bentz said. Businesses operating in larger cities may be able to absorb the increase, but in rural Oregon, only businesses that are part of national chains will be able to pay it.

He said the small town of Halfway, in Baker County, needs \$4 million to build a

sewage treatment plant as required under the federal Clean Water Act, but has no way to afford it.

Grasty, the Harney County judge, said economic problems in rural areas have ripple effects that might not be noticed elsewhere. If a ranch goes out of business, for example, the local firefighting association loses someone who's out on the ground and can spot problems early, he said.

Grasty said he's trying to put together an economic strategy for the county.

"People are so frustrated that they're slowly being undermined out of existence," he said. "We're not being heard. We're listened to, but not heard."

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