

Rancher finds himself in middle of standoff

By CRAIG REED
For the Capital Press

ROSEBURG, Ore. — Rancher Kurt Spencer had a close encounter with the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge occupation situation on Jan. 28.

Spencer, whose beef cattle business is headquartered in the Umpqua area near Roseburg, also owns and works four ranches in Harney and Grant counties.

While traveling north in his red pickup between his ranch near Frenchglen, Ore., at the base of the Steens Mountains and his ranch near Izee, Ore., in the Ochoco Mountains, Spencer and his wife, Veronica, traveled through two checkpoints.

The checkpoints had been set up by law enforcement officers following the Jan. 26 killing of one refuge occupier and the arrest of several others. The rancher, whose Frenchglen ranch is just a half-hour drive south of the refuge headquarters and whose property bor-



Craig Reed/For the Capital Press

Kurt Spencer is shown at his ranch headquarters near Roseburg, Ore., but he also runs cattle on ranches in Harney County. He has experience in working with both the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service to obtain grazing permits.

ders refuge land, said the stop at the first was “scary.”

“They were very professional and kind, but when you have guns kind of pointing at you, it is scary,” Spencer said in describing the scene. “They (officers) were very, very cautious. They asked us to get out and keep our hands free. They were FBI, but

they looked like Army personnel. There were snipers around.

“It felt like a checkpoint in a foreign country,” he continued. “There was no room for error. They asked for ID and ran our license plate. They asked me if I had a gun and I told them I did and where it was in the rig. I told them to help themselves as far as looking, but they ac-

tually barely looked around. I guess they were comfortable with who we were after checking our IDs and plate.”

The couple were then allowed to drive on and at the checkpoint north of the refuge, their travel was barely interrupted. They assumed the first checkpoint had called ahead and given them the OK for the northern stop.

The 59-year-old Spencer, who grew up in Oakland, Ore., and has been a rancher for close to 40 years, said he has dealt with federal agencies in his business operations and has had mixed results. He has a grazing permit with the Bureau of Land Management for his Steen Mountains ranch and a permit with the U.S. Forest Service for his Ochoco ranch.

“I’ve been on both sides of the issue,” he said. “I basically have zero complaints with BLM. They’re been very, very good, easy to work with. The Forest Service has been more challenging. They have a different attitude. It is like they’re

looking for you to make a mistake rather than helping you. BLM coaches me on what to do while the Forest Service is getting more finicky. But I’ve always done what they’ve asked me to do.”

The Bureau of Land Management is the land manager of 3.97 million acres, or 60.6 percent of Harney County. Private ownership totals 1.6 million acres, or 24.9 percent. The U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manage a combined 711,231 acres, or 10.9 percent. The state of Oregon owns 197,417 acres and other government agencies own the remaining 36,507 acres.

Spencer said he has talked to some of his ranching neighbors and he said there is most definitely a split between them on how they viewed the occupation of the refuge headquarters since Jan. 2. He described the people as good farmers, good ranchers and solid people, but with different opinions.

“Some know we have issues with the federal management,

but they wanted the protesters to go home,” he said. “On the other side, there were ranchers going there (the refuge) and having dinner with them and taking them supplies.

“We have an issue, but these were protesters from a radical standpoint,” Spencer added. “The people from Harney County, from Oregon, from the U.S., we’re all in it for preservation of the land. We need to find common ground. We’ll do it.”

Spencer said the general consensus of the Harney County residents was that the issue would be resolved peacefully with no casualties.

“Everybody was dismayed that somebody actually got hurt,” he said. “We were hoping there would be a peaceful ending.”

Spencer said he hopes there will be some good that eventually comes out of the situation.

“Let’s sit down with some people and talk about some of these issues,” he said. “It hasn’t been a good situation, so let’s find some good in it.”

Wildlife refuge employees ready to return to work

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

As an occupation drags on, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees don’t know what they’ll find when they return to work at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

Gavin Shire, Fish and Wildlife public affairs chief, said he has no information about conditions at the refuge headquarters south of Burns, scene of the armed occupation by Ammon Bundy and followers.

“We have received reports that the illegal occupiers accessed federal records locked away on the refuge and have evidence of them accessing government computers, but we know little more than that at this stage,” Shire said in an email.

News reports and social media posts indicated the occupiers fiddled with office computers and took down a section of barbed wire fence.

One occupier was arrested in Burns after he drove a government vehicle into town. Another used refuge equipment to clear a new roadway.

Shire said the refuge contains items and places of “immense cultural significance” to the Burns Paiute Tribe.

“The tribe has expressed their outrage at the callous disregard the occupiers have shown for their cultural heritage,” Shire said by email. “We share that outrage and will seek and exercise appropriate recourse at the appropriate time.”

Another agency spokesman, Jason Holm, was particularly angry about artifacts being handled and the road construction. He called it “deplorable” and said the roadwork might have damaged culturally significant sites.

“We share in the outrage of the Burns Paiute Tribe,” he said in a statement. “This is disgusting, ghoulish behavior.”

Holm also described the occupiers’ statements as “vaporous pabulum.”

Bundy, his brother, Ryan Bundy, and six others were arrested Jan. 26 when FBI, Oregon State Police and other law enforcement agencies stopped their vehicles north of Burns. An outspoken Bundy follower, Robert “LaVoy” Finicum, was shot and killed by police during the stop. Video released by the FBI shows Finicum reaching into his jacket at least twice before he was shot by an OSP trooper.

Since then, several other occupiers were arrested as they trickled out of the refuge. Four occupiers remain at the refuge and have insisted they be allowed to leave without being charged with crimes.

Employees will repair and rebuild as necessary when they return to work at the wildlife refuge, the agency said in a news release.

USFWS has 17 employees at the refuge who haven’t been able to work for

a month. The refuge also hosts researchers, students, firefighters and others.

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