

Local

Hammond family vs. BLM

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They estimated a little more than 60 in attendance.

Brown said 45 or so attendees were from Harney County, but the rest were from out of the area, including Washington, Nevada, Idaho, Utah and Georgia.

"I got to talk to Ammon Bundy for 15 minutes before the meeting," Justus said. "I have met few people as sincere. The organizers of the meeting went to great lengths to come up with a remedy to the situation. The history of the case is alarming."

That history goes back decades.

In 1999, Dwight Hammond, who is now nearly 80 years-old, along with his son Steven, who is now 46, set a small fire on their own property in the Steens Mountain. The fire crossed onto BLM land and burned some acreage at the time.

In 2001, a similar situation occurred with 139 acres of BLM land scorched.

In 2006, a lightning strike sent a wildfire headed from BLM land toward Bundy property, and they set a backfire to protect that property. One acre of BLM land was burned by the backfire.

The Federal government filed criminal charges.

In 2012 after a two-week trial, Steven received a one-year sentence to prison for setting the 2001 and 2006 fires. Dwight received three months for the 2001 fire setting.

The two opted to serve out the time with the agreement that the case was closed, in order to avoid further stress on the family.

In 2015, the Feds filed paperwork with the 9th

Circuit Court of Appeals, stating that the sentencing judge in 2012 ruled illegally, and the Hammonds acted as "domestic terrorists" in their arson.

The Hammonds were prosecuted for arson under the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996.

The 9th Circuit Court, agreed with the government's assessment.

In October 2015, the Hammonds were each sentenced, more than a decade after the fact, to five years in prison for that arson. This is a sentence, which due to the senior Hammond's age and health, the family says he may not survive.

The result is a storm brewing in Harney County, Oregon.

"What was really surprising," said Brown, "was there was not one single voice of dissent in the audience. I expected some to come and challenge the meeting, to maybe heckle, but there was not one."

Brown went on to add, "If I had to sum up the feeling there, it's that the people of Harney County are totally fed up."

Days after the Hammonds were sentenced in 2012, many pointed out that the BLM started multiple fires that killed and injured cattle, burned homes, fences and power poles and threatened the town of Frenchglen.

A video being widely distributed shows the BLM burning summer grass that ranchers typically utilized to feed cattle. The video also shows a BLM employee starting a fire within 100' of a corral filled with cattle.

"We all know the devastating effects that are caused by wildfires. Fires intentionally and illegally

set on public lands, even those in a remote area, threaten property and residents and endanger firefighters called to battle the blaze," stated Acting U.S. Attorney Billy Williams.

Citizens in and out of Harney County say they are appalled by the conduct of the federal agencies and justice system in this case and view this as double jeopardy.

Thus, this month's meeting in Burns.

The case drew the attention of Ammon Bundy, son of Cliven Bundy of the 2014 conflict with the BLM that ended when three hundred citizens stood as a barrier to prevent an armed takeover of the Bundy Ranch in Bunkerville, NV by BLM law enforcement and militaristic SWAT teams.

Bundy came to Harney County and arranged several meetings to attempt to find a solution that did not result in the Hammond's having to turn themselves into federal marshals for incarceration in federal prison on January 4, 2016.

Failing to achieve an outcome that would provide a review of the case, Bundy, with the aid of several groups, organized that town hall on December 15th at the Harney County Fairgrounds.

This public meeting was intended to offer facts and possible solutions to this situation.

Speakers Bundy and Ryan Payne explained the facts of the case and presented a potential solution for the citizens in the form of a Committee of Safety.

"This is the time and you are the people," encouraged Bundy.

He went on to say, "The question is do you want to create a committee of safety for Harney County?"

After hearing the process the citizens in attendance unanimously agreed to create such a committee.

Seven people were nominated to serve, and after unanimous vote, were elected to form the committee, begin deliberations immediately the following day and to conduct activities and actions to promote the safety of the community and the Hammond family.

Brown said, "The people there believe this goes beyond the Hammond family. This is an attack on the residents of Harney County. Today it's these ranchers, but it could keep on and keep on..."

Brown pointed out that a large number of attendees were former military and law enforcement. Many remain camped, despite the cold, in Harney County to be near the situation for the next couple weeks.

Brown was able to talk to a member of the Hammond family after the meeting. "He was clear that they are scared to death," he said. "The family is scared."

That family member indicated that at this point, Steven Hammond is leaning toward surrendering because, in his mind, he will at least have a wife to come home to after his prison sentence. He fears without a surrender, a government shoot-out puts lives in danger.

"It comes down to if Dwight and Steven surrender," said Brown, "there's really nothing to be done."

As to the results of the meeting, aside from forming the Safety Committee, he said, "There is no clear answer."

For information on the Harney County Safety of Committee, visit www.hccommitteeforsafety.org.

Mrs. Eastern Oregon

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The need to find scholarship opportunities to complete her graduate degree was how McNeil first became aware of, and interested in, the pageant circuit in Oregon.

She said, "I almost applied a couple years but had to postpone my plans due to unforeseen family tragedies."

The director of the competition reached out later to McNeil based on past communications, and asked if she might apply.

So she gave the idea some more thought.

When McNeil was in high school, she represented Oregon for three years in the America's National Teenager Scholarship pageant system. In 1993 she served as "Oregon's Hospitality Queen," and was runner-up for Miss Oregon Junior National Teenager along with Best Essay and Speech in the state competition.

McNeil said, "That same year, I went on the Nashville for the National Competition and was awarded the national Title for the most Volunteer Community Service work in one year with 856 hours Nationally. The following year, in 1994, I received the honor of representing Oregon as the winner of the Junior state pageant and was crowned, 'Miss Oregon's Junior National Teenager' and again won the state award for Best Essay and Speech in the state. In 1995 I won the state title for the Senior Queen."

She added, "Over the three years that I competed, I grew so much as person and developed skills and confidence that have served as vita building blocks throughout my life personally and professionally."

The rest, as they say, is history.

Now, McNeil will also compete next year for the title of Mrs. Oregon America.

She said, "The state competition for Mrs. Oregon America is hard work! I have been partnering with many individuals and business throughout Eastern Oregon to promote literacy in a variety of ways that best meet the needs of individual communities. My of the work I have collaborated on has been with schools and libraries. Because I work full-time and I am married with a family, I am only able to schedule six to eight official appearances per month and do my best to represent all eight counties within Eastern Oregon equally. I travel a lot and work hard to communicate that I represent all of Eastern Oregon."

Preparing for the competition takes her about 15 hours per week. The Mrs. Oregon America pageant is the oldest most established pageant for married women—a competition that has existed for 40 years and serves as the official preliminary pageant for Mrs. America and Mrs. World.

"I have an amazing family," said McNeil, "and would not be able to compete and make all the pieces fit with their complete involvement and support. My husband, Jason, and I have been married for 16 years and we have one four-year-old son who loves to help mommy pick out matching shoes for all of my dresses. We cherish family time together and love air popped popcorn family movie nights and snowshoeing."

"When the opportunity came up for me to compete at the 'Mrs. Level, I knew it would be an amazing opportunity for me to continue to develop who I am as person as well as communicate and serve Eastern Oregon as an ambassador for literacy, strong communities and healthy families," she said.

McNeil said she is allowed four official business sponsors, but currently has two. She said, "My official dress Sponsor is One and Only in La Grande. My Official Health and Wellness Sponsor is the YMCA in Baker City."

This leaves two business sponsor positions still open. These sponsors do receive the benefit of being promoted during McNeil's appearances and fundraisers, as well as on official web sites and Facebook pages.

"It truly is a collaborative partnership," she said of her sponsors. "I will be attending and supporting the YMCA at their Annual Fundraising event in January. I will also be a featured guest at the Annual Fashion Show for One and Only in the Spring."

More information about Lori McNeil can be found at www.mrseasternoregon.weebly.com.

Her January appearances include:

4th - Ontario Community Library, Ontario, OR (Malheur County), Time: 11:00 a.m.

19th - Wallowa County Library, Enterprise, OR (Wallowa County), Time: 10:00 a.m.

23rd - Annual Fundraiser for the YCMA, Baker County Events Center (Baker County), Time: 5:30 p.m.

Every Wednesday afternoon, September through April, McNeil reads to kids at Brooklyn Elementary in Baker City.

Chamber holds open house for new director

BY TODD ARRIOLA
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Baker County Unlimited, Inc., AKA, Baker County Chamber of Commerce, recently hired a new Executive Director, local business owner Shelly Cutler, who will begin work in the New Year, as she replaces current Executive Director Debi Bainter.

Cheryl Martin, Chamber Board of Directors President, and, co-owner of Parker Cabin Guest House in North Powder with her husband, Curt, said, "We're very excited for the Chamber's future, and, wish Debi Bainter the best as she looks forward to a new chapter in her life. Debi was an extremely hard worker, very smart, and was always looking for new programs and ways to help advocate for businesses in Baker County."

Martin said that Cutler, co-owner of Tropical Sun Bronzing Spa (former location of Kona Colors Tanning Salon) since May with Julie Davis, will officially begin work on Monday, January 4, 2016, in her new position for which she would receive training both this week, and, next week.



Photo courtesy of Base Camp Baker.

Shelly Cutler, middle, talks to guests at a Christmas open house hosted by the Chamber to introduce Cutler.

The Chamber hosted a Christmas Open House on Wednesday, December 16, at 4 p.m., in order to allow members of the community a chance to meet Cutler, and, to meet the Chamber Board members, Martin said.

"It was very well-attended by many community leaders, and, folks young and old. Everyone enjoyed

the visiting, the 'goodies,' and, the Christmas cheer," she said.

The member-financed, non-governmental Chamber also includes, in its Board of Directors, Vice President Jeff Nelson, of Blue Mountain Community College Small Business Development Center (BMCC SBDC), Treasurer Cindy Endicott, of Country

Financial, Lorrie Harvey, of Rock Creek Developments, and, Jerry Peacock, of Baker Technical Institute (BTI).

"We want to remind everyone to get your tickets early for the annual Chamber Banquet, coming up on the 16th of January. It promises to be a fun event," Martin said.

Council position still open

The City of Baker City is looking to fill one open position on the City Council. The City will accept applications through the office of City Recorder beginning on December 2nd until January 7th at 12:00 p.m. The individual who is appointed by a majority vote of the City Council will serve a partial term on the Council through December of 2016. An applicant must be a registered voter in the State of Oregon and have resided within the City of Baker City for 12 months immediately preceding the appointment.

To apply go to www.bakercity.com to download and complete the City Councilor application located on the City's home page and submit a letter of interest to Luke Yeaton at City Hall.