

Opinion

— LETTERS TO THE EDITOR —

Enabling acts and disposition of public lands

To the Editor:

The Malheur Refuge occupation is not focused just on the unconscionable and malicious federal assault against ranchers whose land is coveted by the BLM.

The Hammonds are the tipping point, the final straw for these peaceful protesters. No other known remedies remain to stop the loss of private rights, land, jobs, and resources for local inhabitants.

Over 100,000 signatures from across the nation have supported a Petition for Redress of Grievances, which has been ignored.

Further adding to the unrest is the unconstitutional federal plan to take two and a half million acres from neighboring Malheur County to create a National Canyonlands Monument.

This proposed taking will destroy the ranching economy there, and Malheur County ranchers are also at the Refuge occupation.

Representative Greg Walden addressed Congress about this incident and admitted that the Refuge was indeed “public land”. If the federal government owned the land he would say so. They only manage it for us.

The occupiers are part of the public, and have not harmed one thing.

They have not yet been given any order to leave the premises, so they are not trespassing.

Court documents must be produced to evidence that the United States Government has actual title to the land, and I do not believe it exists. BLM employees have been reportedly shredding documents. Why?

Under the terms of the Enabling Act that brought The State of Oregon into the union of Several states, the federal government contracted to dispose of public lands. And they have done so in all the eastern states.

But, because the western states are so valuable in natural resources, a huge federal bureaucracy has sprung up to permanently control these resources.

Thus, our local economies have suffered. Mills have been shut down. Mining is overregulated. Ranchers are bankrupted. We can't even enjoy the forests.

So why are federal laws that simply do not apply within the states tolerated?

These Refuge occupiers have pledged their lives and sacred honor to bring this perfidious federal scheme to the national stage.

Please seek the truth. Resist the lies.

James Iler
Baker City

Harney County situation about heavy-handed Feds

To the Editor:

The big blowup in Harney County with the BLM over public lands is not just about the Hammonds or even the Bundy taker over of the National Wildlife Refuge below Burns. It is about heavy-handed control of people on public lands that is happening to all of the east side of Oregon and beyond and throughout the West. The abuse of power by Federal land managers, taking water rights, forcing grazers off the public lands, closing roads and stalling for years and years mining plans of operations has become onerous at best. It is the government's answer to taking from the public and giving it to the environmentalists. Where else but in America could the environmentalists sue the Federal government and make money doing it—kind of like organized crime except legal.

In Baker and surrounding counties it's the sage grouse lockup on BLM and an attempt for a proposed major lockup by the Forest Service with a new Forest Plan. At the Forest Service proposed Blue Mountain Forest Revision planning meetings people were mad at this insane lock-down of our forests and expressed it. The proposed expanding roadless areas, more proposed National Monuments, more roadless de facto wilderness and proposed game corridors has no benefit except to lock it up for the environmentalists. Still the FS is going on with their plan to lock out the public by proposing to shut down and decommission almost 1,300 miles of roads on the WWNF. We have used these roads since they were built to harvest the timber. These roads are historic and are used by the public to gather natural resources and recreate and fight wild fires.

The Forest Service has mismanaged the forest so badly, you can't walk through them because of the undergrowth and downfall, and now the catastrophic fires burn hundreds of thousands of acres. Here in Baker County two fires joined to burn over 100,000 acres. The Forest Service has committed to logging 500 acres of that burn. Really guys, come on! The environmentalists fight every logging sale and sue and get paid to sue to stop logging sales just to watch it burn a few years later. Environmentalists are not Oregon's friend.

I and most Oregonians do not support the Bundy takeover of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge except for the fact it brought before America the criminal abuse by the heavy-handed land managers with a definite agenda to lock up the West for the environmentalists.

Chuck Chase
Baker City

— GUEST OPINION —

Standing up for rural Oregon

By U.S. Rep. Greg Walden



Rep. Greg Walden is the U.S. Representative for Oregon's 2nd congressional district, serving since 1999.

In recent weeks, the people of Harney County have become no stranger to national headlines. On January 3, a group of armed protesters overtook a federal facility in the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. And on January 5, Dwight and Steve Hammond, father and son ranchers from Harney County who were convicted of arson for setting a backfire that burned 139 acres of federal land, reported to prison to serve the remainder of a mandatory five year sentence.

While these stories played out across every major media outlet, it's important to understand what is driving this anger and what steps we can take to improve the situation.

The thread that ties the Hammond family's case together with the calls of those who took over the Refuge is decades of frustration, arrogance and betrayal that has contributed to the mistrust of the federal government.

Too many people often don't understand the culture and the lifestyle of the great American West— and how much the ranchers and farmers who live in this vast, beautiful, harsh landscape care about the environment, their children's futures, and about America and the Constitution. Nor do they realize how hard they work to produce the food we eat. We're seeing now the extent they will go to in order to defend all that.

While I understand their passion, I cannot condone the actions of the armed protesters, led largely by people who are not from our state. They've made their point loud and clear, and local community leaders, including many ranchers, have asked them to leave. They should do so.

The day after the Hammonds went to prison, I went to the U.S. House floor intending to give a five minute speech on what was unfolding in Harney County. But when decades of my own pent up frustration with the federal government's treatment of rural Oregonians came to the surface, I spoke before my colleagues for nearly half an hour. (You can watch my full speech at www.walden.house.gov/speech).

In my years representing the people of Oregon's Second District, I have worked with local ranchers and the citizens of eastern Oregon to resolve disputes, to find solutions and to create a more cooperative spirit and partnership with the federal agencies. After all, more than half the 2nd District is under Federal management, or lack thereof.

The Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act is a prime example of those cumulative efforts. But after it was signed into law in 2000, little by little, the agencies decided to reinterpret it and follow it at their own convenience, or ignore the law altogether. At the suggestion of local ranchers, the law created the first cow-free wilderness in the United States, but the tradeoff was a legal requirement for the federal government to provide the fencing.

And yet bureaucrats within the Bureau of Land Management wouldn't listen and wouldn't follow the law. They told ranchers they had to build the fence.

When I pointed out their error, they basically told me to stuff it. When I provided them with the documentation from more than a decade before that proved the intent of Congress, they doubled down. And finally, when I got Congress to pass a restatement of the original intent, they said they'd review it.

I don't get angry very often, but this arrogance really got to me. And while there are very good federal workers in our communities who do follow the law, and do work cooperatively to find solutions, it only takes a few of the

others to cause us to lose faith.

A similar experience is taking place across the West through the so called travel management plans. Originally intended to minimize damage from off road vehicles, it quickly became a powerful tool to close roads and shut people out of their forests.

What happened in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest is a classic case in point. After years of community meetings, public workshops and incredible efforts to update the government's faulty maps, a forest supervisor decided she knew better. Her choice of a management plan was such an affront that more than 900 people packed a meeting in La Grande in protest. I, too, was incensed and called upon the Forest Service to withdraw the plan, and they did. But the damage was done. How can people be expected to have faith in a public process when they see outcomes like these?

Meanwhile, other threats loom on these same people. From the onerous “waters of the United States” rules, to threats of more national monuments, the federal government is aggressively trying to get cattle off the range and people off their public lands. Right now, it's strongly rumored that the Obama Administration will declare more national monuments, including one in Malheur County, next to Harney County. It could be up to 2.5 million acres—bigger than Yellowstone National Park.

Ranchers and community leaders are being told either agree to a big wilderness area or plan on getting a monument shoved down your throat. Is it any wonder we feel our way of life is threatened by our own government? If the President wants to help reduce the tension, and try to restore a bit of trust, he would publicly back off this proposal.

The Hammonds made a mistake and went to prison for five years for lighting a backfire that burned 139 acres of federal land. We all know fire is a tool on the range to deal with invasive species and to stop other fires. In 2012, more than a million acres burned in Harney County, alone.

All too often, I've met with ranchers who were burned out by backfires they say should never have been set by the agencies. And while I have the greatest respect for the power of a fire, and the courage and talent of firefighters, they make mistakes, too.

The Hammonds were tried and convicted under a law written after the Oklahoma City bombing. The presiding judge in the case made clear that it's penalties when applied to a fire on the high desert of eastern Oregon didn't make sense. But a court found he lacked the authority to invoke a lesser sentence.

We need to revisit the 1996 law that landed the Hammonds with a punishment disproportionate to the severity of the crime. I'm working with my colleagues to do just that.

We need to have the President understand that more monuments may bring cheers from certain companies and communities, but in reality they leave behind more mistrust and mismanagement.

And those not familiar with the high desert of the West, need to understand what we face before they quickly condemn the frustration and anger that is so evident.

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