

# PANEL TO DISCUSS ANTI-GOVERNMENT EXTREMISTS AND PUBLIC LANDS

*What you need to know about militia movements*

Oregon has been home to standoffs over public lands during the past few decades. Armed militias carried out the takeovers of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge in 2016, the Sugar Pine Mine in 2015 and the headgate standoff during the Klamath water crisis in 2001, says Steve Pedery of Oregon Wild.

“These militia groups are homegrown — this isn’t something that was imported to Oregon from somewhere else.”

Oregon Wild, a nonprofit protecting Oregon’s wild-life, lands and water, will host “The War on Public Lands: Armed Militias, White Supremacists and the Plot to Sell the West” panel at the Public Interest Environmental Law Conference 10:30 am Saturday, March 4, at the University of Oregon.

The panel discussing the anti-government militia movement and efforts to privatize public lands will include Ryan Lenz, a senior writer of Southern Poverty Law Center’s Intelligence Project and the editor of the non-profit’s Hate-watch blog; Steve Pedery, conservation director of Oregon Wild; and Jimmy Tobias, a freelance investigative reporter and contributing writer for *Pacific Standard Magazine*.

Lenz says he’ll delve into extremist involvement in land use issues, which has become more complicated and aggressive over the past few years. “Anti-government extremists have latched onto the idea of assisting local farmers, loggers, miners and others in protesting federal use laws regarding public lands,” he says.

In April 2014, Lenz covered the standoff between the Bundy family in Nevada — brothers Ammon and Ryan

Bundy would later lead the Malheur occupation. “The BLM [Bureau of Land Management] withdrew fearing bloodshed, and for the rest of 2014 and for all of 2015 they did nothing,” he says of the federal agency.

“In that time we saw the anti-government movement view the federal inaction as sort of a stamp of approval or rather a window for them to continue pushing this line of rhetoric and this line of argument that the feds had no legal purview over those lands,” Lenz says.

Lenz says a goal of these extremist groups is to privatize lands to get them out of control of the federal government. “They see it as a tyrannical overreach by the federal government trying to restrict their access to the land they own as the people.”

Federal public lands are owned by the public and are administered by the BLM, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies, Lenz says.

Arran Robertson, communications manager with Oregon Wild, says the Posse Comitatus movement can be seen as the origin story of the anti-public lands extremist movements that have evolved into the situation that the public deals with today.

The SPLC traced the Christian Identity movement back to the 1930s. “It was a movement that was laced with anti-Semitism and beliefs about Jewish banking conspiracy,” according to SPLC’s website.

Pedery says the movement dates back to the ’50s in Oregon. Currently, he says, “Grant County, specifically the John Day area, has been a hotbed of both the white supremacists and the militia movement in Oregon.”

Militia movements are defined by their conspiracy theories and Pedery says that Grant County “declared itself a United Nations Free Zone because some of the local militia folks and local white nationalists there were talking about ‘Agenda 21,’ the plans the UN had to take over America, there were rumors of UN troops hanging out in the Strawberry Mountains.”

Pedery says the purpose of the PIELC panel is to educate people about the issue and to ensure “it doesn’t leave the public consciousness.”

“I think we are going to see extremism on the rise — already under the Trump administration, we’re seeing violence on the rise, lots of horrible things happening from Jewish cemeteries [being vandalized] to engineers from India getting shot in Kansas,” Pedery says.

Lenz, who also edits SPLC’s Hatewatch blog, discussed the newest hate group data published by the center. An increase in anti-Muslim groups rose from 34 groups in 2015 to 101 in 2016. Lenz says the group has asked President Trump “to distance himself from the this movement repeatedly.”

The Trump campaign “blew a dog whistle to a number of extremist and the radical right groups that saw in Trump’s campaign promises an answer to a lot of their complaints,” Lenz says.

“They saw Trump was promising to make America great again, and they heard that to mean make America white again,” he says. ■

The Public Interest Environmental Law Conference, “One Cause, One Voice,” runs March 2-5, at the University of Oregon School of Law, 1515 Agate Street. Download a brochure at [pielc.org](http://pielc.org). The event is free and open to the public.

# THE ELLIOTT OPTIONS

*Environmental groups call on the Legislature and state treasurer to keep the state forest in public hands*

Advocates for the Elliott State Forest had high hopes in February when Gov. Kate Brown released her plan to keep the state forest in public hands. But that optimism was dashed when newly elected Democratic State Treasurer Tobias Read voted with Republican Secretary of State Dennis Richardson to go ahead with a sale proposal to Lone Rock Resources.

The Elliott is a coastal rainforest and home to the marbled murrelet, a threatened seabird species. It is also tied to the Common School Fund, which provides money for K-12 school children.

The State Land Board, made up of the governor, secretary of state and treasurer, governs Oregon’s state forests. The Elliott has been at the center of a years-long battle between those who want to log it for profit and potentially to generate money for the school fund, and those who want to see the forest preserved for wildlife habitat, recreation and carbon sequestration.

Despite losing the SLB vote, Brown directed Oregon’s Department of State Lands to continue to explore options to keep the land public. Conservation group Cascadia Wildlands says that direction leaves open the possibility that Oregon Legislature and other parties can craft a viable public option.

Robin Meacher, wildlands campaign director for Cascadia Wildlands, says the group is now targeting the Legislature in

hopes it will come up with the bonding money called for in Brown’s proposal and also because support from the Legislature sends a signal to the SLB.

Brown’s proposal, which came out shortly before the SLB meeting, calls for “working with the tribes to regain ownership of their ancestral lands while protecting the Common School Fund,” as well as for \$100 million in state bonding capacity that would “decouple a portion of the forest from the Common School Fund trust land” and put money into the fund.

On the rest of the forest, there would be “sustainable timber harvest while protecting endangered and threatened species” under a Habitat Conservation Plan.

Meacher says Cascadia Wildlands was “very surprised” at Read’s vote for the sale proposal and against the governor’s plan. She says that “after all this time pushing the governor and the Land Board for a solution, then we get the leadership [from Brown] and then here’s an unexpected, monstrous hurdle.”

Read tells *EW* he voted on the only proposal that existed — the one from timber company Lone Rock Resources. Read says he is concerned about his fiduciary responsibility and that he was not comfortable rejecting Lone Rock and the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians and the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians, which partnered with the timber company, “without a viable alternative.”

Cascadia Wildlands together with Oregon Wild, Sierra Club, Audubon Society and more are rallying the Oregon State Legislature to come up with the bond money, but Read says the Legislature likely won’t come up with a bonding bill until the end of the session, which would be after the SLB’s April 11 meeting.

Meacher says they are calling on citizens to “keep the pressure up on Read because he is a decision maker in this and needs to continually hear it.”

She points to the recent decision by the massive Outdoor Retailers to not return to Utah for its twice yearly annual showcase because of that state’s stance on putting public lands into private hands.

Oregon U.S. senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, along with representatives Earl Blumenauer and Suzanne Bonamici, invited Outdoor Retailers to see what Oregon has to offer in a Feb. 27 letter.

Read calls the timing of the Outdoor Retailers decision and the decision of the SLB vote to sell public lands “an unfortunate coincidence” but the former legislator says of the Elliott, “We have been wrestling with this issue for several years.”

Meacher says, “It’s a strange dynamic to see a state about to sell off an 80,000 acre public forest throw that hat in the ring.” ■