

# Ranchers whose case sparked standoff get grazing rights back

By CONRAD WILSON  
Oregon Public Broadcasting

As one of his last acts in office, ousted U.S. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke signed off on returning grazing rights to the eastern Oregon ranchers whose prison sentences led to a 2016 standoff at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

Convicted arsonists Dwight and Steven Hammond lost their grazing permits after they were sentenced on federal charges for igniting fires on public lands.

But President Donald Trump pardoned the ranchers last year.

Zinke's order grants the Hammonds, a long-standing pillar of the Harney County ranching community, a return of their 26,000 acres of federal land to graze cattle.

Zinke cited the pardon as part of his reason for restoring the Hammonds' permit.

"I find that the pardons constitute unique and important changed circumstances since the BLM (Bureau of Land Management) made its decision," he wrote.



AP Photo/Rick Bowmer

Members of the group occupying the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters stand guard in 2016 near Burns.

During the 2012 trial of the Hammonds, jurors were told that Steven Hammond handed out matches to members of a hunting party he was with and told them to light and drop the matches on the ground, "because they were going to 'light up the whole country on fire,'" according to a 2015 press release from the U.S. Department of Justice.

Combined, the Hammonds served around

18 months in jail for the charges. But the Justice Department appealed the case, saying the men should each have served the federal mandatory minimum sentence of five years for destroying public property, meaning the land.

Many Harney County ranchers believed the Hammonds when they testified that those fires were to protect their land from invasive species and other wildfires.

In 2016, Ammon Bundy and other anti-government activists seized the wildlife refuge in a standoff that lasted 41 days as a response to the Hammonds' return to prison.

While Zinke's order was signed weeks ago, it only came to the attention of the local field office in Burns on Monday, the first day the federal government had reopened following a 35-day partial government shutdown.

## Oregon Health Authority says \$42 million in overpayments recovered

Associated Press

SALEM — Oregon Health Authority officials said Tuesday they have recovered about \$42 million the agency overpaid to organizations that coordinate Medicaid benefits for as many as 1 million residents.

Officials repaid the money owed to the federal government, health authority spokesman Robb Cowie said, the Statesman Journal reported.

This comes after a state Senate Republican from Keizer revealed a proposal Monday for the state to demand the money back. State Sen. Kim Thatcher's proposal would require the health authority to recover all overpayments to coordinated care organizations within 60 days of the bill's passage.

Thatcher's spokesman, Jonathan Lockwood, said Tuesday they want more answers from the health authority regarding when and whether the bills were paid back before deciding whether to proceed with Thatcher's legislative concept.

The issue dates back to late 2017, when an Oregon Secretary of State audit found the health authority could have avoided spending an estimated \$76 million on patients who were members of coordinated care organizations but may have been ineligible for coverage under the Oregon Health Plan, also known as the state's Medicaid program. The estimate included about \$17 million in state money.

However, the overpayment figure ended up being about \$42 million, Cowie said.

Thatcher's proposal was designed to get coordinated care organizations to pay back the money.

"We need to know why this has been allowed to happen and how we can prevent it from ever happening again," she said in a statement. "Every dollar thrown away is a dollar robbed from taxpayers that is not spent on promised health care for those most in need."

The legislative move comes after the Oregon Health Authority opened the application period for coordinated care organizations that want to serve Oregon Health Plan patients from 2020 to 2024.

Patrick Allen, the health authority's director, said last week the contracts

"will shape the next five years of care that 1 million Oregonians rely on."

The 1 million figure is disputed, however. State auditors in 2017 found that only about 800,000 patients are covered through coordinated care organizations. That's because certain Medicaid users, including tribal members, don't have to enroll in coordinated care organizations, according to the audit.

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"We've been given direction," said Jeff Rose, the Burns district manager for the BLM. "We're just going to work with the Hammonds to make it work. What we do in Harney County is figure it out and make it happen."

Suzy Hammond, Dwight's wife and Steven's mother, said her family is grateful.

"We're very appreciative of the industry people who have worked really long and hard in order to make things

be right," she said.

She added that the details of putting her family's cattle back on the land haven't been worked out yet.

"I don't know if you've worked with the government before, but until you see it in black and white sometimes it doesn't happen," she said.

Hammond said it would mark a big change for the ranch if it happens.

"We've been running a ranch that's half there," she said.

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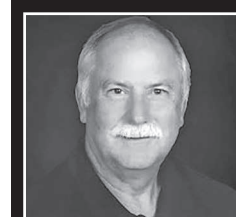


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