

# Occupation hurts cause of rural America

The armed militia groups who failed to provoke a shooting war with federal agents during a standoff at a ranch in Nevada have brought their show to Oregon's Harney County. Local residents are largely rebuffing their militancy.

So should the rest of rural America.

**EDITORIAL**

*Voice of the Chieftain*

Militia members supposedly came to town to support two local ranchers convicted of setting fire to federal land. When they failed to whip the ranchers and the townspeople into a revolutionary frenzy, a splinter group took over facilities at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge as a larger protest against federal control of western lands.

The occupation is led by Ammon Bundy, son of Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy, whose dispute with the Bureau of Land Management led to a tense standoff between federal agents and militia in 2014.

We struggle to understand what they hope to accomplish. Their action does nothing for the ranchers they allegedly came to town to support. Their stated goal of holding their position until the federal government returns the land to private ownership is at best a delusional hope, and does nothing to resolve the real issues.

This desperate action allows critics to describe these complaints to urban America as the farcical rants of armed militia, dubbed "yeehadists" by CNN.

The federal government holds title to massive parcels of public lands throughout the West. That's been settled law for a hundred years. Many would like that land turned over to the states, as was the case with much of the federal land east of the Rockies.

The real question is how that land should be managed and how grazing and natural resource extraction will remain viable and part of the multiple use doctrine that historically governed public lands.

Government policy once fostered the timber, livestock and mining industries that became the economic lifeblood of rural Western communities. Current policy — the result of environmental lawsuits and regulatory and legislative changes — is largely responsible for draining that lifeblood.

At the same time, private property rights have been eroded by the same forces. Individuals and businesses have suffered under heavy-handed regulatory enforcement that at times borders on despotism.

These conflicts dovetail nicely with the frustrations of many Americans who feel economically and politically displaced.

Enter the militia groups.

We understand their frustration with the federal government. We recognize their right to peacefully protest and lawfully exercise their 2nd Amendment rights.

But we disagree with their interpretations of the Constitution and these tactics.

The remedy to these grievances will not come from armed confrontation or other extralegal means justified by specious Constitutional theories.

Instead we trust the tools provided by the Founders — the ballot box, the legislative process, the courts.

The constraints on ranchers, timber workers and miners are real. Any hope of getting a legislative solution that accommodates both conservation goals and traditional livelihoods will require reasoned debate and the empathy of urban voters and legislators.

The armed occupation of a lonely federal wildlife refuge in the wilds of Oregon will only hurt that effort.



CAGLE CARTOONS



## Speaking out for rural Oregon

In recent weeks, the people of Harney County have become no stranger to national headlines. On Jan. 3 a group of armed protesters overtook a federal facility in the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. Two days later 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.

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](http://www.walden.house.gov/speech)).

In my years representing the people of Oregon's 2nd District, I have worked with local ranchers and the citizens of eastern Oregon to resolve disputes, to find solutions and to create a more co-



**GUEST COLUMN**

Rep. Greg Walden

operative 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. Finally, when I got Congress to pass a restatement of the original intent, they said they'd review it.

A similar experience is taking place across the West through 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.

The Hammonds were tried and convicted under a law written after the Oklahoma City bombing.

The presiding judge in the case made clear that its 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.

*U.S. Rep. Paul Walden, a Republican, has represented Oregon's 2nd congressional district since 1999.*

## Parties should stick to the wolf plan

What is the worth of a word? It used to mean a lot. It used to be enough. A handshake closed deals, whether selling a neighbor hay or a piece of land. A verbal promise was binding, even in the courts, but unfortunately times change and written contracts with a signature now bind those legally, to keep that promise, that handshake.

Example: the Oregon Wolf Plan, touted by some as one of the best in the

### LETTERS to the EDITOR

nation. Ranchers didn't like it, so they wrote a minority addendum, but have adhered to the plan as written. However, despite the written words in the plan, several groups have sued once, and are now stating their intent to sue again, to reverse the recent delisting of the wolf in Oregon.

What say you Rob Klavins? What is the worth of a word?

Ramona Phillips  
Joseph

### Thanks for the memories

After 32 years working with the State of Oregon Aging and People with Disabilities, I have retired.

Hired in 1983, I lived through the administrations of six governors, five managers, four agency name changes, three agency "reorganizations" and two public employee strikes.

Over the years, I conducted Adult Protective Service investigations, licensed over 15 adult foster homes, served with

our State Field Review team, trained case managers, led the committee that sponsored legislation forming the Wallowa County Health Care District, served on advisory councils to Community Connection, Safe Harbors and the Alcohol and Drug and Transportation programs, and worked with scores of families to help them obtain needed medical and social services.

In 2004, I assumed specialized work with nursing home residents. Two years ago I was reassigned to work in the La Grande office. Over the years, I estimate that I have driven more than 350,000 miles in the line of duty.

But these will not be the best memories that I take with me. The memories I cherish are those of the many individuals and their families who allowed me into their lives for a short while to assist them through a difficult time. I learned so much from each of you, observing your courage, strength, kindness, dignity and faith. I will recall that I met and worked with wonderful and compassionate care providers throughout the nine counties of Eastern Oregon. You have enriched my life immeasurably. A heartfelt thank you.

Pam Latta  
Joseph

### LETTERS POLICY

Letters to the Editor are subject to editing and should be limited to 275 words. Writers should also include a phone number with their signature so we can call to verify identity. The Chieftain does not run anonymous letters.

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