

The cost of dissent in Grant County

■ Former OSP officer Gordon Larson is pondering leaving his home due to extremists he claims are led by Sheriff Glenn Palmer

By Emily Cureton
Oregon Public Broadcasting

Gordon Larson's world burned in 2015. His ranch lost timber, livestock and infrastructure. His family's house narrowly escaped the Canyon Creek Fire; 43 other homes in his Eastern Oregon community weren't so lucky.

More than four years later, Larson's property shows a resolve to stay: new fences, a new water system and charred stumps in every direction.

"What we love about it is a sense of solitude and a sense of belonging to something bigger than you," Larson said.

But after all the effort to recover, he and his wife have talked about leaving their home of more than 20 years. And not because they're afraid of wildfire.

"The only reason is because we have a group of extremists led by a sheriff," said the 55-year-old former police officer.

In 2014, Larson retired as an area commander for Oregon State Police after a 27-year career. He volunteered for 12 years on the Grant County School Board. Last year, he ran for a seat on the County Commission, "and I've regretted it every day since then because it began this nightmare," he said.

His opponent was Sam Palmer, younger brother of a controversial law enforcement official in the region, Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer.

Larson lost the election decisively. During the campaign, the sheriff reported Larson for a timber theft that forest managers say never happened, and the sheriff's supporters challenged his water rights.

It's not the first time this sheriff stands accused of using the power of his office, and the zeal of his supporters, to target people who criticize his activism. Larson is the latest to have a bitter feud with Palmer — a sheriff elected by a few thousand voters but supported by anti-government groups across the West known as the Patriot Movement — in an isolated community where many express disdain for state regulations.

Larson said he clashed with this broader political shift to the right. Like Palmer, he is a registered Republican. "But they want to portray me as not a good enough Republican ... or a Democrat," Larson said.

Palmer denied targeting his former law enforcement colleague.

"I've always considered Gordon a friend. When he retired, he did an about-face. I don't know what I did, or whether it was the occupation tie-in," the sheriff said.

'You will all be judged'

The rivals agree on one thing: 2016 was a turning point. The year opened with anti-government groups taking over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in next-door Harney County.

In January, both Larson and Palmer went to a meeting in Grant County where occupation leaders Ammon and Ryan Bundy were invited to speak. Confusion and tension filled a packed room at the John Day senior center as people waited for the Bundys to arrive.

Soon, information trickled in about a confrontation with law enforcement on a snow-covered highway 60 miles away. Instead of the invited speakers, there were prayers and an open mic for people to state their grievances.

Larson was the only person to speak against the refuge occupation. "The Bundys and this entire group need to go home," he said. "Maybe some of us feel like we've been mistreated by the Forest Service, but by God, we can stand up



Gordon Larson watches a stream flow on his Grant County ranch.

and do it as neighbors. We don't need your help."

That highway confrontation resulted in OSP officers fatally shooting a member of the Bundys' group. Robert "Lavoy" Finicum became a martyr within the Patriot movement. Finicum attempted to break through a police roadblock, shouting "I'm going to go meet the sheriff," and "You back down, or you kill me now," before police shot him.

Special deputies appointed by Palmer later accused Larson of having a role in intercepting the occupation leaders. The retired OSP commander with connections to the FBI was suspicious in the eyes of the Patriot movement. Even years later, Larson's name appeared on a list of people accused "for the cold blooded murder of Lavoy."

"You will all be judged in time and will pay the fiddler," reads the public Facebook post by Jim Sproul, directed at Larson, among others. Sproul has a close connection to Palmer. He's spoken on the sheriff's behalf in news stories and was appointed by Palmer in 2014 as "public lands patrol," according to county records.

Sproul protested Larson's use of irrigation water in June 2018, on the same day as David Traylor, another special deputy once appointed by Palmer.

In Oregon, affidavits like this can trigger a rarely invoked state regulation to cancel water rights. Basically: Use it or lose it. If two people swear you aren't using the water, you can lose your claim to it, unless you prove them wrong.

"It's just shy of \$1,000 to have a judge hear our case," Larson said.

He cut a check to the Oregon Water Resources Department, which will make a decision based on the recommendation of an administrative law judge.

In 2018, the agency's own staff review of irrigation on the property states nonuse wasn't an issue.

Larson's hearing has been delayed several times, and in an unusual move, the agency has closed it to the public "based on security concerns."

'It's their loss'

For years, Palmer has opposed the U.S. Forest Service, arguing its land management policies create poverty and wildfire. He ended a contract so his deputies would no longer patrol its campgrounds and roads. But in 2018, the sheriff reached out to the agency to accuse Larson, his brother's political opponent, of stealing logs. Palmer said he didn't initiate the report.

"It was given to me and I forwarded it to the Forest Service. It's a timber issue out of our jurisdiction," Palmer said.

It's unclear who made the initial report, but the Forest Service put out a press release at the time saying it acted on information from the Grant County Sheriff's Office and found no evidence of stolen

timber. Still, the accusation continued to reverberate. A special deputy appointed by the sheriff in 2015 repeated the allegation to an environmental group, and it spread on social media.

Palmer accused his own political opponent in 2012. In the weeks before an election, the sheriff made a complaint to OSP about Richard Gray, a John Day police officer running against him. Palmer's report claims Gray accessed files at the sheriff's office without permission. OSP declined to investigate, "as there was no indication of criminal activity," a spokesman said.

Palmer sent a memo to his staff banning Gray from the county jail and sheriff's office. Gray went on to become the John Day chief of police, and years later, he filed an ethics complaint mentioning the incident.

"I ran for Office of Sheriff and during (the) election campaign, Glenn Palmer lied on several occasions accusing me of doing many dishonest things," Gray said in the complaint.

Ironically, it was Larson, then a state police commander, who Palmer called first to report Gray, according to a report Palmer later deleted from his electronic records system.

Palmer downplays any official connection between himself and former special deputies like Sproul and Traylor. The sheriff opened a file cabinet and retrieved a handwritten letter of resignation signed by Sproul, dated July 2016. That's two years before Sproul challenged Larson's water rights and about three weeks before The Oregonian published an investigation about Palmer's practice of credentialing his supporters.

Palmer said except for search and rescue, the deputies have resigned or their credentials lapsed.

In 2016, the local manager of 911 services was among those to contact the Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training with concerns about the special deputies' access to law enforcement information.

After her complaint, dispatchers who coordinate first responders across a 4,500-square-mile area lost access to arrest histories and other records kept by the sheriff's office.

"There have been many times where officers will ask us about something, and we'll say, 'We don't have access. We can't look at that,'" according to Valerie Maynard, dispatch manager for Grant County Emergency Communications Agency. "Denying us information is not a benefit to the public. It boggles my mind, honestly."

Palmer defended the move in an email. "We have cases that are sensitive and confidential. ... They are a dispatch center and under our contract should be answering our phones and radios. They are not an investigative agency."

During an interview, he was dismissive of the complaints the state standards agency has received about him — at least 14 since 2016.

"I know I've got some people out there that don't like me and that's their prerogative," Palmer said. "It's their loss."

Ammon Bundy came to Palmer's defense in a 2016 Facebook video, to say the state has no authority over the Grant County sheriff and to "encourage all people who love to be free to stand with Sheriff Palmer and help defend the people's power as a republic."

Palmer has his own history of activism. This year, a lobbying group paid his way to Washington, D.C., to attend events focused on "illegal alien crime." In 2012, he accepted a nod for "constitutional sheriff of the year" by a national group that considers sheriffs the "ultimate law enforcement authority in their respective jurisdictions."



Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer, shown on the right with arms raised above his head, appears in a White House Facebook photo from Sept. 27, 2019.

Palmer plans to run for a sixth term as sheriff in 2020, as he fends off his latest ethics complaint.

'I have become an extremist'

Larson filed a complaint against Palmer in August, though the roots of their conflict date back years. He first publicly criticized Palmer's leadership during the Malheur occupation. Before that, at the same time the sheriff was becoming the darling of anti-government groups, the state police commander gathered intelligence about them.

"I was part of the Oregon Department of Justice Titan group, which monitored extremism," Larson said.

Soon after he retired from law enforcement, the 2015 Canyon Creek Fire burned more private property than any Oregon wildfire in the past 80 years. Resentment rose from the ashes in Grant County, as residents demanded an investigation into the U.S. Forest Service's response.

Larson said he focused on rebuilding from the losses on his ranch.

"It's been slow to heal following the Canyon Creek Complex Fire," he told a local reporter in 2018, while he was running for county commissioner against Sam Palmer. "People view each other through a political prism rather than if they are good neighbors."

The divisions have taken a toll on Larson. He describes feeling betrayed by the state he once worked for, and he's taken his own drastic actions to hold it accountable, like secretly taping calls with public officials, "because I don't trust them."

After the fire, the occupation, the ongoing feud with Palmer, Larson starts to sound as edgy and paranoid as the type of anti-government activist he might have monitored.

"I have become an extremist against bad cops. I have become an extremist against liars, and I've become an extremist against state agencies that participate in trying to destroy someone's livelihood and take their water," Larson said.

"At least for the time being, that's me."

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