

GUEST COMMENT

Speaking out for rural Oregon

By Rep. Greg Walden
For the Blue Mountain Eagle



Rep. Greg Walden

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).

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 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. 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. Greg Walden represents Oregon's Second Congressional District, which includes 20 counties in central, southern and eastern Oregon.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Court member should apologize for comments

To the Editor:

In the Wednesday, Dec. 30, Blue Mountain Eagle Letters to the Editor on page A4, there is a letter titled "County Court decision perplexing," written by Ron Ballard, Mt. Vernon.

I, Frances M. Preston, request two things from Grant County Court as a result of this posting:

1. To make known publicly who the "member" of the county government was by name and position who indicated to Mr. Ballard that if someone retired from the Forest Service "they have fed at the trough too long" and intimidated their opinion had no credibility.

2. Said "member" of county government provide a public apology to that Forest Service "retiree." Respectfully submitted,

Frances M. Preston
Prairie City

Editor's note: Preston read this letter at the Jan. 6 Grant County Court Meeting. County Judge Scott Myers said he made the comment to a friend as a joke in a private conversation outside of his county duties. He said he did not believe an apology was necessary for the joke.

An apology to Judge Myers

To the Editor:

I would like to formally apologize to Judge Myers for the issue that took place in the Grant County Courthouse. I understand a gentleman came to the courthouse asking for a copy of the resolution asking Grant County residents if they wanted to enter into direct coordination with the Forest Service. Instead of simply directing the man on how to get the resolution, the judge proceeded in attacking the writer as dim-witted and having "fed at the trough" of the federal government as an employee. I understand now he was exercising his First Amendment rights. I feel responsible for that set of remarks, so I want to set the record straight.

Frances Preston is my aunt, I'm very proud to say that. She served as a Forest Service employee for over 40 years throughout the West in various administrative positions, and in that career she strived to serve the public.

The reason I'm apologizing is this: If in any way I caused Judge Myers to feel that his response was an appropriate one, while conducting his duties as the Grant County Judge, while in the

courthouse, I apologize. I realize I've caused folks to speak out on these issues and not always to the liking of the County Court.

Judge Myers was asked for an apology in Court on Jan. 6, he refused, and noted he has his first amendment right, which I completely agree with. I'm just sorry the pressures of the job caused him to speak his personal mind in an official capacity, as he is the voice of Grant County.

As we have learned, personal attacks are getting us nowhere. And if local leadership would simply listen to the residents on these issues, things would not get to this point.

John D. George
Bates

Federal land managers' agenda to lock up the West

To the Editor:

The big blow up in Harney County with the BLM over public lands is not just about the Hammonds or even the Bundy takeover 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? It's kind of like organized crime except legal.

In Baker and surrounding counties, it's the sage grouse lock up on BLM and an attempt for a proposed major lock up 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 expanded 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 Forest Service 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 WNF. 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

Agencies should answer fire questions

To the Editor:

I would like to commend Nicky Spraupe on his last two letters to the editor. They were very well written and did not include threats, insults or the hyperbole of many of the past letters on this subject. Refreshing.

He asked two questions that need honest answers. 1. Why wasn't the Canyon Creek Complex fire considered a legal disaster area? 2. Why wasn't an objective criminal investigation on the fire control done at an early stage?

These questions need answers from the agencies involved.

John Aasness
John Day

Constitutionalists' boondoggles

To the Editor:

I feel outraged that one of the truly remarkable, federally protected places in the West has been taken over by a band of armed criminals. And just like some of Grant County's right-wing radicals, they think they are the only ones that can interpret our country's Constitution. Here locally, our sheriff has even declared he is the single authority in Constitutional matters. I suspect that the only thing that has kept him and some of his newly appointed special deputies from publicly giving their support to the Malheur (National Wildlife) Refuge boondoggle is that it is not their Malheur National Forest boondoggle.

Where is Janet Reno when we need her?

Terry Steele
Ritter



Letters policy: Letters to the Editor is a forum for Blue Mountain Eagle readers to express themselves on local, state, national or world issues. Brevity is good, but longer letters will be asked to be contained to 350 words. No personal attacks; challenge the opinion, not the person. No thank-you letters. Submissions to this page become property of the Eagle. The Eagle reserves the right to edit letters for length and for content. Letters must be original and signed by the writer. Anonymous letters will not be printed. Writers should include a telephone number so they can be reached for questions. We must limit all contributors to one letter per person per month. Deadline is 5 p.m. Friday. Send letters to editor@bmeagle.com, or Blue Mountain Eagle, 195 N. Canyon Blvd., John Day, OR 97845; or fax to 541-575-1244.



Grant County's Weekly Newspaper

PUBLISHER..... MARISSA WILLIAMS, MARISSA@BMEAGLE.COM
EDITOR..... SEAN HART, EDITOR@BMEAGLE.COM
ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT..... KRISTINA KREGER, KRISTINA@BMEAGLE.COM
EDITORIAL ASSISTANT..... CHERYL HOEFLE, CHERYL@BMEAGLE.COM
COMMUNITY NEWS..... ANGEL CARPENTER, ANGEL@BMEAGLE.COM
SPORTS..... ANGEL CARPENTER, ANGEL@BMEAGLE.COM
MARKETING REP..... KIM KELL, ADS@BMEAGLE.COM
OFFICE MANAGER..... LINDSAY BULLOCK, OFFICE@BMEAGLE.COM

1 YEAR SUBSCRIPTION RATES
(including online access)
Grant County\$40
Everywhere else in U.S.....\$51
Outside Continental U.S.....\$60
Subscriptions must be paid prior to delivery

Periodicals Postage Paid at John Day and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER
send address changes to:
Blue Mountain Eagle
195 N. Canyon Blvd.
John Day, OR 97845-1187

USPS 226-340

Copyright © 2016 Blue Mountain Eagle
All rights reserved. No part of this publication covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or copied in any form or by any means — graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping or information storage and retrieval systems — without written permission of the publisher.