

SIDES

Continued from Page A1

the group of supporters they already have, I'm very, very fearful for what's ahead for our county."

Schuetz said, in a few short weeks, the occupiers caused an enormous amount of strife in Grant County. She said she could not imagine what the people of Harney County have gone through.

Another picketer, Adele Cerny, Bear Valley, said some of the supporters of the refuge occupation appeared to support violence if necessary to make their voices heard.

"I say that attitude has no place in a law-abiding democracy," she said. "It actually tears apart a democracy."

John Day resident Dave Traylor, who wrote a letter to the editor urging the occupiers to "stay the course," said people have many different views about the situation. He said the occupiers were unfairly portrayed by the media, though he added they should have stayed in campers on the refuge land and not entered the buildings. He also said, if the occupiers would have stayed at the refuge, they might have been able to accomplish some of their goals, such as freeing the Hammonds.

"If they had just stayed there, I think they could have won some concessions, and that mainly being the Hammonds getting a new trial or being released," he said. "Ted Turner wouldn't get prosecuted for something like that if he'd set a backfire on his property (and it got out of hand).



File photo

A public meeting continued at the senior center in John Day Jan. 26 after guest speakers Ammon and Ryan Bundy were arrested en route.

They wouldn't have put him in prison for five years on terrorism. I think the Hammonds got a raw deal."

Traylor said the refuge occupation was "born on frustration" with federal policies, and he'd like to see a return to using natural resources to better the watersheds, to boost employment and timber sales and to prevent catastrophic wildfires through good stewardship. He said many people are unaware of the underlying issues.

"Most people, it's not because they're dumb; they're just woefully uninformed," he said. "The best way to deal with this frustration level: Get to know the issues, so you know the truth."

County resident Gordon Larson, a retired Oregon State Police lieutenant and rancher, spoke out at the meeting against the refuge occupation. He said local residents did not need outsiders to speak for them. These people, he said, don't serve on local school boards or attend local churches

or give back to the community, whereas many local people who work for the government do.

"The ranchers here have a strong enough voice," he said at the meeting. "Maybe some of us feel like we've been mistreated by the Forest Service, but by God, we can stand up and take care of it as neighbors."

Larson said he worked as an officer in a gang unit in his career, and the refuge occupiers reminded him of the gang mentality, where the criminals would claim a territory without the support of the residents to the detriment of the community.

Jim Spell, John Day, said he too attended the meeting to stand against the occupiers.

"My participation does not indicate that I support what the Forest Service does or doesn't do, but we don't need outsiders to resolve that situation," he said.

Spell said he was not afraid of the occupiers but wanted them to leave the people of Grant County alone. He said he was disappointed the situation ended with bloodshed, and he hoped people could move forward peacefully.

"I just hope the community can move on and find some process to resolve all these feelings," he said. "And I pray that it's over with."

Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

LAND

Continued from Page A1

"What they've done is really hurt those with legitimate beefs with the federal government about how the land should be managed," he said.

In the public's mind, the protesters' hostile tactics have been conflated with the goal of increasing local control over federal property, which weakens their case in the political arena, he said.

"If they wanted an uprising in Congress, they just made it that much harder," Miller said.

The protesters' actions won't bolster attempts to transfer federal land to the states, which already had legitimacy among conservative lawmakers in multiple state legislatures before the refuge takeover, said Martin Nie, a natural resource policy professor at the University of Montana.

"They're less of a spectacle and should be taken more seriously," Nie said.

The philosophy of Bundy and his followers, meanwhile, is entangled with far-right interpretations of the U.S. Constitution and the power of county sheriffs but does not offer any serious proposals for changing federal land policy, he said.

"I don't think this spectacle has helped that cause at all," he said.

Among people who were uneasy about excessive federal authority, though, recent events will likely reinforce the notion that the government is out-of-control, said Mark Pollot, an attorney who is fighting federal agencies in court on behalf of deceased Nevada rancher Wayne Hage.

Left-wing protests, such as "Occupy Wall Street," invaded private property and were more disruptive than the refuge standoff but did not elicit a similarly

strong-armed reaction from the federal government, he said.

Pollot said that distrust of the government will particularly rise if there are indications that federal agents overreacted during the arrests and did not have to shoot the protesters' spokesman, LaVoy Finicum.

If nothing else, the confrontation will show that Western land policy is more than a minor issue and deserves Congressional attention, Pollot said.

"It will add some weight to the debate," he said.

On the other hand, there's the risk of a shift away from the political and legal channels that critics such as Wayne Hage have traditionally used in the "Sagebrush Rebellion" against federal land policy, he said.

"I'm concerned there will be people who will now think that's worthless," Pollot said.

The restrictions placed on ranchers have gained visibility in Washington, D.C., Salem and Portland, but that doesn't mean they will be changed, said Bruce Weber, director of Oregon State University's Rural Studies Program.

It's unclear how the existence of a perceived "martyr for the cause" will change the situation, Weber said.

"People who believe the Constitution prohibits federal ownership and management of those particular lands won't change their minds," he said.

Concerns about growing federal restrictions on public lands long predate the refuge occupation and will likely continue even if the current conflict is resolved.

Bob Skinner, a fifth-generation cattle rancher in the Jordan Valley area, heads a group opposed to the proposed Owyhee Canyonslands wilderness and conservation area, which would cover 2.5 million

acres in Oregon's Malheur County.

The designation would severely regulate or prohibit grazing and other activities on an area that is bigger than Yellowstone National Park and covers 40 percent of Malheur County.

Skinner said his worst fear is that the arrests of several protesters and the death of Finicum will "activate" people who hold similar anti-government views.

Even so, the incident has brought more visibility to Western concerns over public land.

"I can't help but think it's brought some awareness to government overreach, that might have some impact," Skinner said.

Rep. Kurt Schrader, D-Ore., compared the standoff in southeast Oregon to the "Black Lives Matter" movement, which arose in reaction to Western concerns over public land.

"Rural America faces the same lack of recognition," Schrader said.

There's a "palpable sense" that government policy has focused on the economic welfare of urban areas while overlooking rural areas, he said.

As to the effect of the occupation on the federal land debate, Schrader said the impact is uncertain.

While people sympathize with the hardships faced in the rural West, the occupation has also shown they have no appetite for lawlessness, he said.

Schrader said he and other members of Oregon's Congressional delegation are pushing to reform overly restrictive rules on grazing and logging while protecting the environment on federal property.

"The scales have tipped so far to the left that you can barely do anything there, it's so cost-prohibitive," he said. "We've got to change the federal policy."

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