

DOJ

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not beholden to any other county officer, which is how it should be.”

Facebook pages and groups in support of Palmer have more than 2,000 members and likes.

Even Ammon Bundy, the leader of the refuge occupation, has voiced his support of Palmer from jail.

Palmer declined to speak to OPB for this story.

“I am not doing any interviews in the past, present or future,” he wrote in an email, “and I am not likely to change my mind.”

A Contentious History With Federal Agencies

Palmer’s approach to the occupiers is just one example of a leadership style that, for years, has set him apart from other Oregon elected officials.

Palmer challenges federal land policies and practices, refuses to enforce laws that he believes are unconstitutional and fosters a following of sheriff-empowered citizen deputies who report to him. He’s part of a movement of self-described “constitutional sheriffs,” who view their position the highest executive authority within a county with the power to remove or bar federal agents from their jurisdiction. Palmer is the only current Oregon sheriff listed as associated with the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association.

Palmer, a decorated Air Force veteran with more than 30 years of law enforcement experience, has been in office as Grant County Sheriff since 2000, and is currently running for re-election. He and his wife are known in John Day for hosting community Christmas dinners open to anyone and building beds made out of logs for a local charity.

His 16 years in the sheriff’s seat have been unusual from other law enforcement officers in a number of ways. Last fall, he deputized local citizens to create a document called the Grant County, Oregon Public Lands Natural Resources Plan, an effort to give him and potentially other county leaders more say in how federal lands are managed. Palmer surprised leaders of Grant County’s governing board when he brought them his plan in September and asked them to adopt it.

“I’ve empowered a panel of 11 people to formulate this plan, and they gave it to me,” Palmer told the county judge and two county commissioners. “I’m adopting it, and I’m here to tell you today that I’m implementing coordination.”

The idea behind Palmer’s plan is to leverage more local say in federal land management by emphasizing something called the “coordination clause” in federal land policies — an obscure, often overlooked requirement that directs agencies to coordinate with local governments.

“I want a seat at the table,” Palmer said. “The people that I represent are not getting heard. I’m not getting heard.”

The court declined to adopt the plan, said Grant County Judge Scott Myers.

“It was inaccurate. It was written and agreed upon by these deputized individuals outside of any public view or

public input,” Myers said. “It did not involve at all a public process, and they wanted us to take it as our plan. It was not our plan.”

For years, Palmer has expressed frustration with the U.S. Forest Service, tying Grant County’s economic struggles with the agency’s land management. He’s battled with the Malheur National Forest over things such as firewood cutting permits and road access, and Forest Service law enforcement patrols on county roads.

At the county meeting during which he presented his natural resource plan, Palmer expressed frustration at not being included in Forest Service management decisions that affect his ability to conduct search and rescues.

“I can’t get a meeting, I can’t get an answer, I can’t get a document from these people,” Palmer said.

But the supervisor of the Malheur National Forest, Steve Beverlin, said it’s Palmer who refuses to come to the table. In four years of attempts, Beverlin said, Palmer has never agreed to a meeting. Beverlin said he’s even sent his requests to get together via certified mail, but the sheriff did not respond.

In 2011, Palmer ended a law enforcement contract with the Malheur National Forest that funded his office to the tune of thousands of dollars per year. In a Blue Mountain Eagle report that year, the sheriff said he planned to make up lost revenue with money made by issuing concealed weapon licenses. Palmer sees himself “not fighting with the federal government. In my opinion I’m defending the people that I serve.” That’s from his 2012 speech at a Constitutional Officers and Peace Officers Association event where he was recognized as “Constitutional Sheriff of the Year.”

“I’ve pretty much started doing what I’m doing on my own,” Palmer said of his approach to federal agencies. “I just got to a point where I was tired of seeing our economy and our communities turn into ghost towns, and the public lands being shut off for no reason at all.”

Citizen Deputies Back Palmer

Palmer has deputized at least 69 Grant County citizens, including the 11 he deputized to develop the resource plan. Deputies are appointed “to do and perform any act which (Palmer) might perform as sheriff,” according to their deputy certificates. Sheriffs can deputize citizens for various reasons, but it’s unusual for them to designate “special deputy” community members at the rate and number as Sheriff Palmer has — or even at all.

“I can tell you it’s not a stan-

“I will not tolerate nor will I permit any federal incursion within the exterior boundaries of Grant County, Oregon, where any type of gun control legislation aimed at disarming law abiding citizens is the goal or objective.”

Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer

dard practice in Oregon,” said Malheur County Sheriff Brian Wolfe, who is also president of the Oregon State Sheriffs’ Association. “I can’t think of any other sheriff that’s doing it at the current time.”

OSSA Executive Director and former Curry County sheriff John Bishop said that in his career, he can remember deputizing only one citizen, to help with patrol at the annual county fair. That person was a retired law enforcement officer.

Sproul, one of Palmer’s deputies, said that he and others with an interest in natural resource issues were deputized “to be eyes and ears of the sheriff.” So, if they saw poaching or other illegal activity, they could alert Palmer.

“We were not there as law enforcement,” Sproul said. “Just if we’ve seen something to report it to the sheriff, especially in regards to access, roads, road closures, stuff like that.”

But the duties of special deputies are not spelled out in their appointment certification, and that vagueness is a source of anxiety for some county leaders.

“It’s always worried me,” said Grant County Judge Myers. “It’s really hard to guess what [Palmer] considers their authority when it comes down to it. Can they tell somebody to get on the ground and put their hands up? That’s spooky stuff.”

Myers also said he’s never seen Palmer deploy deputies in a way that seemed inappropriate.

Palmer would not respond to questions about his special deputy force, but some of the residents on his list are involved

with search and rescue. While all Oregon counties require special training for search and rescue teams, most do not go so far as to deputize those volunteers.

Valerie Luttrell, the John Day emergency dispatch manager who submitted a formal complaint about Palmer, expressed concern over these deputies’ access to the Law Enforcement Data System. That’s a statewide database that includes sensitive information about warrants, criminal histories, license plate information and more.

In her complaint submitted

he refused to enforce Oregon’s new law that requires background checks for private gun sales.

He explained his stance in a letter: “... we shall take no part in investigating, responding to, expending resources or taxpayer funds in making issue with disarming of law abiding citizens when those citizens are exercising their 4th Amendment right to be secure in their personal effects and 2nd Amendment right to bear arms.”

Before that, in 2013, Palmer joined several other Oregon sheriffs and others across the United States in saying he would not enforce any federal laws increasing firearm regulations.

“I will not tolerate nor will I permit any federal incursion within the exterior boundaries of Grant County, Oregon, where any type of gun control legislation aimed at disarming law abiding citizens is the goal or objective,” Palmer warned Vice President Joe Biden in a 2013 letter. “We live in a free society and firearms ownership and the right to defend ones self from becoming a victim of a criminal act or from a far reaching government attempting to enact laws that are unconstitutional.”

Up For Re-Election

Palmer is running for a fifth

four-year term this November. His opponent is former Under-sheriff Todd McKinley, who in statement said he decided to run after seeing the “audacity of individuals who think they can dictate the course of Grant County, without the input of all.” McKinley currently works as the county’s director of community correction.

The Department of Justice investigation could stretch beyond the November election. But even if state regulators were to revoke Palmer’s law enforcement certification, it would not necessarily lead to him being removed from office. If he were to perform law enforcement duties without certification he would be breaking the law, but only a vote by Grant County citizens could force him from his job. And in Grant County, perspectives on the sheriff remain fiercely divided, with both sides claiming that the majority of the community agrees with them.

“Our sheriff is probably the greatest asset the people — the actual people — have,” said Tad Houpt, another one of Palmer’s deputies.

“Is he here to protect us?” said retiree Mark Cerny, who believes it was inappropriate for Palmer to meet with the militants from the refuge. “I don’t think so. I think he’s here on some type of his own agenda that I don’t understand.”

Dave Blanchard contributed to this report.

Looking for an Adventure This Summer?

Summer Youth Conservation Crew Jobs Are Now Open with the North Fork John Day Watershed Council!

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The Wheeler County Stockgrowers, in conjunction with OSU/Wheeler County Extension,

will host a Stockgrowers Spring Meeting on Friday, March 25, at the Spray Grange, from 6:00 to 8:30 PM.

This meeting will convene local stockgrowers encouraging them to bring their ideas for the group’s revitalization. Officer elections and planning for the upcoming year will occur. Please bring your ideas and input.

The evening will consist of a complimentary tri-tip dinner, door prizes and great conversation with friends and neighbors. We will host Cari Wade, DVM who will speak on vaccinations, disease, and the importance of pre-weaning conditioning.



Please contact Amy Derby, Wheeler County Extension agent at (541) 763-4115 with questions or to RSVP for the event.



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