

After Malheur

■ Currie Craven, FENW President

I am confident I am not the only citizen who is grateful the armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge is finally over. Being Westerners, many of us passionately care for our great American tradition of public land ownership. Like most passions, individuals are entitled to have great zeal to influence our actions in the public, political windstorm that has become current political discourse. Following a course of domestic terrorism is beyond accepted norms and, indeed, the rule of law.

Those of us who follow public land issues through greater than usual observation have become increasingly alarmed with the trend some have likened to a resurgence of the “Sagebrush Rebellion” of the 1960s and 1970s.

Current militant protest activities have been noted to be frequently ideologically based on interpretations of the US Constitution. These interpretations have largely been rejected by the courts. Undeterred, proponents of the view federal lands belong to states or counties have exhibited their rejection of the rule of law in extreme measures. Unlike the grazing, logging and mining interests of early days, the most extreme proponents bring modern semi-automatic weapons to the discourse, blatantly intimidating public servants, locals and their fellow Americans who would like to simply enjoy their public lands. These actions, whether in Oregon at a critical wildlife refuge, in Utah at Recapture Canyon over ATV abuse and damage to archeological treasures, or overgrazing in Nevada have correctly been described as domestic terrorism. As Americans, we support the right of other Americans to seek redress of grievance through protest. Bringing weapons, and threatening their use, is un-American, period.

Opponents of our legacy of federal public land use also demonstrate less lethal, but no less un-American tactics.

The concept of transferring control of public lands is challenged by national organizations as diverse as the Wilderness Society, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, and Backcountry Hunters and Anglers. A recent article by Josh Kuntz of the formerly mentioned group points out how lands under state control are frequently subject to mandates that they be managed “for the highest financial benefit of the state.” Josh points out “Idaho has already sold over 1.5 million acres of state land...over 30 percent of all state lands it owned. Nevada sold 2.7 million acres (99.98 percent) of its state lands.” The public is the loser of valuable access for short term gain.

Representative Rob Bishop of Utah has effectively ended the highly popular and almost zero cost programs of the Land and Water Conservation Fund. According to an article by David Jenkins, Bishop has “recently unveiled a Utah public land initiative, which he describes as a “massive land transfer.” David continues, “Using the language of sovereign citizen extremists like Cliven Bundy, Bishop claims his group will develop a legislative strategy to “return these lands back to the rightful owners,” in other words, take them away from the American people.”

We at Friends of the Eagles Nest Wilderness (FENW) take our responsibility of active stewardship of all public lands seriously. This is not an issue of political division. Republicans, in the great tradition of President Theodore Roosevelt, and Democrats, can find common cause in accepting the responsibilities of supporting public lands by paying attention, sharing concerns with family, friends, and acquaintances, and demanding public land support from elected officials.

The Land and Water Conservation must be fully restored. Funding for catastrophic wildfire must be separate from U. S. Forest Service operational budgets. Land management budgets must be realistic to deal with the pressure of an ever growing admiring public who “love the resource to death,” and deal effectively with U. S. Forest Service stated four threats: negative impacts from irresponsible recreation, loss of open space, catastrophic wildfire, and invasive-noxious weed species.

FENW encourages our fellow citizens to pay attention and act. We must not allow threats to our cherished legacy of public land ownership on a national scale to be undermined by politics of division or budget impoverishment leading to neglect and despair. This is not for our time alone. I often quote President Teddy as he famously said, “the greatest good for the greatest number”...applies to generations unborn “within the womb of time.” We owe protection and responsible stewardship of America’s unique public lands to those unborn within the womb of time, indeed not just our citizens, but of the world.