



Oregon Standoff: BLM's "Burn 'Em Out" Legacy — The Untold Backstory

Why is there such bad blood between ranchers and federal bureaucrats? Mainstream media reports on the recent trial of Oregon Ranchers Dwight and Steven Hammond and the occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge (aka the "Oregon Standoff") rarely fail to mention the longstanding antagonism between western ranchers and the federal government's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Forest Service (USFS). But more often than not, these media accounts retail the propagandist line of the federal agencies: that they are merely carrying out their legal responsibilities in the face of unreasonable and uncooperative ranchers whose destructive actions are damaging the "public lands."



This dominant media narrative is usually heavily sprinkled with quotes from environmental militants who denounce the "welfare ranchers" as parasites who are a threat to so-called endangered species, wildlife habitat, rivers and riparian ecosystems, etc. In addition, there is the frequent charge that the poor public servants at the BLM and USFS must suffer regular bullying by and threats from the big, bad ranchers. But who is really doing the bullying and threatening? Who is abusing whom? And who is really [abusing the "public lands"](#) — and the environment in general — the bureaucrats or the ranchers? (For a basic, corrective primer on the much-misunderstood "public lands" issue in the western states, [click here](#).)

The Hammonds, hardworking citizens and longtime respected members of their rural Harney County, had their names dragged through the mire, have been prosecuted as "terrorists" and "arsonists," have been sentenced to prison for five years, and have been extorted into accepting huge fines and the likelihood that they may lose the land they have laboriously cared for to the agency (BLM) that has coveted it for a long time. And their "crime"? Accidentally burning a few acres of "public lands" while carrying out legitimate, standard practices of "controlled burning" for weed control, fuel-load reduction and back-fire burning against a wildfire threat.

To those farmers and ranchers who work the land and regularly have to deal with BLM and USFS bureaucrats, this was not only an outrageous injustice, but also an exercise in hypocrisy so huge and contemptible as to be mindboggling. They know firsthand that these Fedgov agencies are a veritable Arsons-R-Us, annually burning up *millions of acres of public lands* and tens of thousands of acres of private property, as well as endangering lives (and sometimes taking them) and destroying homes.

Among the many examples still fresh in the minds of the people of Harney County is the



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Frenchglen/Miller Homestead Fire, which burned more than 160,000 acres, and the Long Draw Fire (more than 558,000 acres). Both of these fires were started by lightning in July 2012. But, critics charge, the BLM carried out a number backfire operations that 1) spread the fire instead of stopping it; 2) caused massive losses to private property and public lands; 3) killed cattle and left many wandering around badly burned; 5) endangered the lives of firefighters and residents; 6) not only failed to notify ranchers and residents before initiating their arson/backfire operations, but repeatedly gave them false assurances that everything was under control, no danger; 7) repeatedly refused to deploy available firefighting assets (hand crews, water trucks, helicopters, planes) requested by ranchers and residents.

A graphic video of the fire (below) includes footage showing: BLM arsonists spreading fire right up to corrals with their torches; outraged ranchers dumbfounded by the BLM actions; cattle killed by the fire and live cows badly burned. None of the government employees responsible for this conflagration were punished. None were prosecuted as arsonists or terrorists, even though, if judged by the same standards applied to the Hammonds, their crime would be on an order of magnitude many times greater.

(Note to readers: The first 12-plus minutes of the video focuses primarily on the development of the fire; at about 12:40 there is more concentrated footage showing the BLM fire starters in action and the dead and injured cattle.)

In the video interview below, Harney County rancher John Witzel provides his account of the BLM's actions regarding the Frenchglen/Miller Homestead. Among other things, Witzel recounts watching the BLM employees spreading the fire on and near his property. He called neighboring ranchers to warn them that the flames would soon head their way when the wind picked up. None of them had been warned by the BLM; in fact they had been told that everything was fine and there was no danger

In the video below, Jerry DeLemus interviews Harney County rancher Jacob Rothjeb about the Frenchglen Fire and the exasperation that many locals feel toward the BLM's firestarting/firefighting practices in the area in general.

The rest of the story.

Posted by [Jerry DeLemus](#) on Tuesday, January 12, 2016

It is difficult for urbanites and suburbanites and those not living in the shadow of the federal behemoth in the great rural expanses of the western states to understand the anger of the people there toward the federal agencies that have a stranglehold on their jugular — and are squeezing the lifeblood out of them. Among the many articles by *The New American* covering this subject over the years is [this one](#) by this correspondent covering the congressional hearings held in 1999 in John Day, Oregon, in Grant County, which is right next door to Harney County.

The story was the same: Using various environmental pretexts, the USFS and BLM were shutting down the public lands and private lands, destroying the only viable economic activity in Grant County, ranching and timber, and driving the once-thriving rural communities into destitution and government dependency.

To those familiar with their notorious records, it is little wonder that the BLM and USFS are referred to by those under their heels as the Bureau of Liars and Miscreants and the U.S. Fire Starters (or U.S.



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Forest Circus) — and other unprintable cognomens. However, they are but the *largest* of the federal landlords, not the only ones. The BLM controls nearly 250 million acres. The USFS “owns” more than 193 million acres. Then there’s the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 89.1 million acres; the National Park Service, 84 million acres; Bureau of Reclamation, 7.1 million acres. In addition, the EPA and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers claim regulatory jurisdiction over the water, air, and land of virtually the entire country, with an especially heavy and disproportionate boot print on the rural areas of the 12 western states, where almost all of the federal “public lands” are located.

As we have pointed out in past articles, the Framers of our U.S. Constitution did not intend, nor contemplate, that the federal government would become the gargantuan landlord it now is. According to the Constitution, our law of the land, “The Congress shall have Power ... over such District (not exceeding ten Miles square) as may, by Cession of particular States, and the Acceptance of Congress, become the Seat of the Government of the United States, and to exercise like Authority over all Places purchased by the Consent of the Legislature of the State in which the Same shall be, for the Erection of Forts, Magazines, Arsenals, dock-Yards, and other needful Buildings.”

The meaning is clear: The federal government was (and is) allowed to have a 10-mile square (100 square miles) for a seat of government. Property for “Forts, Magazines, Arsenals,” etc., for national defense purposes, could be purchased from the states — so long as the state legislatures consented to said purchases.

That’s it. New states added to the union are to be admitted on an “equal footing” with the original 13 states, meaning with full sovereignty over their lands, not with a distant federal landlord controlling 30 percent, 50 percent, or 90 percent of their land and resources. Not with Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Diane Feinstein, Bernie Sanders, Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid, Paul Ryan, Mitch McConnell, or any of the other D.C. Beltway politicians and the Wall Street-Big City interests to whom they are beholden dictating policies covering the most vital areas of their lives and livelihoods.

The conflicts exemplified by the 2014 Bundy ranch standoff and the ongoing standoff in Oregon will continue to multiply and intensify until the federal government is forced to give up its unconstitutional land holdings in the western states. This was the course that was followed in the case of the other states in the earlier decades of the westward movement. It is long past time for the western states to assume their “equal footing” with the rest of the states and to end the unnecessary and tragic conflicts that inevitably arise from being treated as colonies subject to the capricious rule of faraway federal dictocrats.

Photo: Screenshot from video showing BLM setting Frenchglen Fire

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