

The search for balance on public land

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Whatever it is you want to call what's been going on in Harney County for the past two weeks, it has definitely both hurt and helped the cause of ranchers in the West — where the largest landlord is the federal government.

Various labels have been applied to the situation near Burns, where a bunch of self-appointed protectors of the Western way of life have been occupying a federal bird refuge. None of these labels seem to fit.

Armed takeover? Hardly. The place was closed for the New Year's holiday weekend when the group led by Ammon Bundy moved in.

Terrorists? Who have they terrorized?

Militia? Well, they do seem to have lots of guns.

The Bundy Bunch has hurt the cause of ranchers, loggers and miners by trivializing the real issues faced by people living in the rural West.

Ironically, and nearly inexplicably, the attention focused on Harney County has raised awareness nationwide of real Western issues, pretty much in spite of the opportunistic publicity hounds who moved into the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

In an impassioned speech on the floor of the House of Representatives, U.S. Rep. Greg Walden tried to steer the debate away from the Bundy sideshow and back to the real issues. He pointed to the controversy over the Steens Mountain National Monument, which was proposed in the late 1990s during the Clinton administration and would have placed severe limits on the land. So Walden and other lawmakers got together with then-Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt. What they came up with was a model for what can be achieved in our nation's capital when everyone comes to the table with open minds and the shared goal of doing right by the American people.

“To his credit, (Babbitt) said, ‘All right, I will give them that chance.’ And he did,” Walden said during his speech in the House chamber. “We went to work on legislation. It took a full year ... and we created the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act We tried to do all the right things and create the kind of partnership and cooperation that the federal government and the citizens should have.”

If you were expecting a happy ending, you'd be wrong. The people who work at the Department of the Interior — the “bureaucrats” that Walden saved his most scathing remarks for — wasted little time in chipping away at the agreement.

“Not long after that became law — and it was heralded as this monumental law of great significance and a new era in cooperation and spirit of cooperation — some of those involved on the other side and some of the agencies decided to reinterpret it,” Walden said. “The bureaucracy wants to interpret the laws we write in ways they want.”

I caught up with the congressman a couple of days after he delivered this speech. He said that, in some ways, the bird refuge in Harney County is a good example of what has occurred with federal land throughout Oregon and in other states.

When it was first established in 1908, the Malheur National Bird Refuge had 81,786 acres. Since then, it has grown to 187,757 acres. Walden said much of that growth involved ranchers being “forced off of their land” by a federal bureaucracy using questionable tactics.

“Our Western way of life is being threatened,” he said.

So I asked him point blank: Does the federal government own too much land?

After a long pause, he responded, “I think the answer is probably yes. I think so.”

He continued, “The issue isn't whether they own too much, it's what they do with it or don't do with it. If the feds fulfill their obligations, then it's probably fine. But people in offices in Washington, D.C., are making decisions that people living on the land have to deal with.”

Walden emphasized that he's opposed to what Ammon Bundy and his posse are doing in Harney County. He also offered zero support for Bundy's father, Cliven Bundy, who was involved in an armed standoff with the BLM two years ago in Nevada and who still owes the federal government \$1 million in delinquent fees for using federal land to graze cattle.

“Ranchers who use federal land should pay their grazing fees,” Walden said. “I hear that from ranchers. They tell me, ‘I pay mine, they should pay theirs.’”

No one is saying that ranchers, loggers and miners should have free and unregulated access to federal land. On the other hand, the federal government can't keep changing the rules and expect people to just go along for the ride.

“Too often, individual bureaucrats don't follow the law, or bureaucracies don't care about how their actions affect people,” Walden said. “The locals ought to have more say in these actions.”