

To: U.S. House of Representatives

Re: Forum on Extremism on Public Lands

From: Betty Beckley, Friends of the National Conservation Training Center (NCTC): *Past Chair, speaking individually not for the group.*

Unfortunately, the takeover at the Malheur Refuge a few months ago may signal greater restrictions on public access and use of not only the Malheur facility but other refuges throughout the nation. Based on news coverage, it appeared that Malheur's surrounding community was not unified in enthusiastic support for the Refuge. Some community members even spoke in support of the invaders. Lack of enthusiastic community support presents a serious problem for a government facility. Tight restrictions result in the public feeling excluded. Even groups closely associated with a facility, like the Friends, or individual volunteers, may feel excluded as a facility feels the need to impose higher levels of security.

The takeover group at Malheur involves public at its worst, but it represents a minority---not the majority---of society. Most of us value, support, and want to be a positive part of efforts toward conservation and preservation of our natural resources, especially in nearby locations. Given the opportunity, locals can help send a message that such takeovers are unacceptable.

For years, in fact for most of our history, public lands were up for grabs by individuals seeking their own, private fortunes. In fact, government policies urged private use and development of public lands by individuals and businesses. The Malheur occupants represent the residual of that expectation. Even though it becomes clearer every day that our national priorities must change, individual and business attitudes lag behind this knowledge. As a nation we need to preserve our remaining land and provide a hospitable environment for threatened life forms. To its credit, the Fish and Wildlife Service is actively engaged in this kind of planning, but somehow the message of its important place in the survival of civilization is not working as it must if we are to be successful.

My own experiences at the National Conservation Training Center may serve as an example. Before the 9/11 crisis, NCTC was reasonably open to the public. Many events were sponsored to help showcase the facility and educate the public. Friends were involved regularly as were other local conservation groups like the Audubon Society. There were lectures every month or so with attendees welcomed to purchase dinner in the dining room, sometimes dining with a speaker before an event. There were many other kinds of educational events: slide presentations by NCTC staff or other invitees, conservation and wildlife films, an annual arts and crafts show, Audubon's annual "Race for the Birds," landscaping assistance and Saturday cleanups of invasive plants or planting of trees. NCTC was rapidly establishing itself as a beacon for green progress, its buildings moving toward Lead Certification and setting a national example for best practices with its sewage and recycling systems. This Fish and Wildlife Educational Center was a vibrant part of the community and enjoyed strong local support, along with fulfilling its role as a "national" resource for conservation training. After 9/11 the basic work continues, but the atmosphere has become increasingly restrictive: security stiffened, fewer events offering public participation, and generally an atmosphere that feels more like "us" versus "them" rather than a partnership.

While Malheur may make us instinctively want to circle the wagons even tighter, it should instead make us more aware that strong relationships with the general public, building strong Friends organizations,

and welcoming volunteers and groups with similar interests will help insulate against activities like those carried out at Malheur.

June 7, 2016