



Forum: Extremism on Public Lands
June 15, 2016

Ranking Member Grijalva, Ranking Member Thompson and members of the House Natural Resources Committee and House Committee on Homeland Security:

The National Wildlife Refuge Association is the only non-profit organization focused solely on promoting, supporting, and enhancing the National Wildlife Refuge System. Managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the 568 million acre Refuge System is the world's largest network of lands and waters dedicated to wildlife conservation. The Refuge System is comprised of 565 national wildlife refuges located in every U.S. state and territory along with the four Marine National Monuments in the Pacific. The Refuge System generates \$2.4 billion to local economies as visitors enjoy wildlife observation, hunting, fishing, photography, environmental education, and interpretation on America's most beautiful and ecologically important landscapes.

The National Wildlife Refuge Association applauds Ranking Members Grijalva and Thompson for holding a forum to examine the rise of anti-government extremism on public lands discuss efforts to confront the associated dangers.

The National Wildlife Refuge System, like all American public land systems, has received its share of anti-government sentiment, yet had experienced nothing like the 41-day occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Burns, Oregon, in early 2016. Armed militants from across the country descended upon the wildlife refuge to make their stand and ostensibly [“restore and defend the Constitution.”](#) After forcing the evacuation of Malheur NWR staff, causing millions of dollars in damages, desecrating Native American artifacts, and terrorizing the local community, the occupation finally ended on February 11, 2016. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) coordinated closely with the Service and local authorities to arrest the militants. Unfortunately, one of the occupiers was killed during a confrontation with Oregon State Police and the FBI. While the occupation may have concluded months ago, the local community is still picking up the pieces while the Service scrambles to find enough taxpayer dollars to repair the damage.

The Malheur occupation was only the latest manifestation of a growing anti-government, anti-public lands agenda that has existed primarily in the American West since states like Utah and Nevada were first admitted in the Union. Much of the unused or unwanted lands of these then-territories were designated under federal control as part of the agreements that established their statehood. Federal agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) were established to manage and ensure access for all Americans on our national wildlife refuges, national forests, and other public lands.

While many Americans value and enjoy our public lands, there is a well-organized minority who view public lands as federal overreach and advocate transferring ownership to the states or sell them outright to the highest bidder. A small faction of this minority has resorted to violent extremism to demonstrate their opposition to federal lands. Many of these individuals are repeat-offenders inciting flare-ups of what has been dubbed the “Sagebrush Rebellion” across the American West. For instance, the leader of the Malheur occupation was Ammon Bundy, son of Cliven Bundy, who in 2014 organized an anti-government standoff with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Nevada over grazing fees on BLM land.

The Malheur occupation was a tense, difficult, and at times frightening ordeal, yet it could have been much worse. As the Malheur occupation continued to make headlines, the radical militants obscured the true story of the collaboration between the local community, conservation groups, state agencies, and the federal government in Harney County. The FWS spent three years working with ranchers, environmentalists, state agencies, and other federal agencies to draft the Malheur NWR’s Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP). The CCP incorporates a diverse range of stakeholder interests to ensure successful wildlife conservation while addressing the needs of community members.

The community outreach and work with local law enforcement and ranchers conducted by the Refuge Manager and FWS Federal Wildlife Officer (FWO) stationed at Malheur NWR helped built a solid foundation pivotal in maintaining the relationship between the Service and the community throughout the occupation.

The one FWO stationed at Malheur is one of 316 Federal Wildlife Officers tasked with providing security for the American public, educating visitors, and enforcing conservation laws to protect fish, wildlife, and cultural resources for the entire Refuge System. An effective force of 316 officers, comprised of 234 full-time and 82 dual-function officers, is responsible for protecting the Refuge System’s 48 million annual visitors. While the Service’s FWOs do a tremendous job educating and protecting the public, the Refuge System Law Enforcement program remains grossly understaffed. With approximately 568 million acres of lands and waters under their protection, there is no way that only 316 officers can adequately protect our natural resources and the visiting public. According to a 2015 International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Report for the FWS, 1,149 full-time FWOs are needed to adequately protect wildlife and ensure safety for refuge visitors and staff. That means the Refuge System is operating at a

Despite operating with only 27 percent of the force recommended by the IACP, the Service’s FWOs are setting the national standard for federal law enforcement through partnership agreements under the Supplemental Wildlife Enforcement Program (SWEP). By working with local, state, and other federal agencies, Refuge System Law Enforcement builds productive partnerships and leverages funding for law enforcement activities.

As evidenced by the Malheur NWR occupation, relationships built on effective, clear communication with neighboring communities and strong partnerships among local, state, and federal agencies are essential not just to address anti-government extremism on public lands, but to prevent these incidents from occurring altogether. **The National Wildlife Refuge Association recommends fully funding the National Wildlife Refuge System Law Enforcement program at \$80 million** to place enough FWO boots on the ground so that our natural resources and the 48 million Americans who visit national wildlife refuges annually are sufficiently protected. More FWOs will enable more community outreach, in turn creating stronger relationships between the FWS and both public and private partners.

As more Americans take up residence in and around cities - 80% of the U.S. population resides in urban areas according to the 2010 census - it is crucial to devise new strategies to reach our country's youth and get them outside to experience our public lands. Programs like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Urban Wildlife Conservation Program engage Americans who live in our metropolitan centers in conservation and provide opportunities to experience their local wildlife refuges. By instilling environmental stewardship in our nation's youth, we can inspire the next generation of conservationists, lawmakers, and advocates for America's public lands.

The occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge thrust the public lands debate into the national spotlight. While the militants endeavored to rally support for their cause, sportsmen, ranchers, environmentalists, and countless other Americans resoundingly condemned the armed takeover and drowned out the occupiers' rhetoric with their own message -- public lands belong to ALL Americans.

We look forward to working with both the Natural Resources and Homeland Security Committees to devise more strategies to quell anti-public lands sentiments. Not only do our nation's natural resources deserve protecting, but the American people deserve to be safe when they visit our public lands.

Thank you for holding this forum.

David Houghton, President