



New Mexico Wilderness Alliance

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Congressman Raul Grijalva
1511 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

June 10, 2016

Dear Rep. Grijalva,

Thank you for holding a hearing on countering extremism on America's public lands. It is a tremendously important issue, and deserves Congress's attention. We would like to provide some general observations about the increasing levels of anti-federal extremism, as well as some example of its presence in New Mexico.

The New Mexico Wilderness Alliance is a 501 (c)(3) organization dedicated to the protection, restoration, and continued enjoyment of New Mexico's wildlands and wilderness areas. We do this through a variety of legislative, administrative, and community-based activities, including advocating for the designation of new wilderness areas and national monuments on appropriate public lands, participating in Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management planning efforts, and working with the federal agencies through volunteer service projects.

As you know, the so-called "Sagebrush Rebellion" of the 1970's and 1980's is currently experiencing a resurgence. The reasons for this are debatable of course, but some ranchers in the American West seem convinced that their way of life is under threat from the federal government, and the embodiment of this threat, for them, has become agencies like the BLM and the Forest Service, President Obama, and endangered predators like the wolf. They see all of these as forces to be rebelled against, fought, and even eliminated.

The result of this mindset has evolved not just into political action on the part of these groups, but active hostility, aggression, and antagonism. Nearly every Western state has seen bills introduced at both county and state levels calling for the immediate seizure of public lands and their placement in the hands of local governments, where their fates would be unsure, but where they would certainly not remain the treasured possession of every American.

In addition to these legislative attempts, many Western states have experienced more direct action on the part of some of the more extreme members of these groups. The most publicized examples, of course, have been the occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge earlier this year, and Cliven Bundy's one month armed stand-off with the BLM several years ago.

We wanted to share some examples from New Mexico, where we have seen both these strategies take hold. We have seen four bills introduced into our state legislature over the last several

years modeled on legislation offered by the American Legislative Exchange Council¹. These have been championed primarily by legislators from southeast and northwest New Mexico; both of the state's high oil and gas areas. Thankfully, none of these bills have made it out of Committee, but we anticipate another similar bill in the 2017 legislative session.

New Mexico has also experienced events similar to those at Malheur and in Nevada, though on smaller, less-publicized scales. In 2011, when these sentiments were first bubbling to the surface, your colleague, Congressman Pearce, supported an illegal tree cutting in the Lincoln National Forest in Otero County, NM. This was to be a kind of protest at what he saw as Forest Service failure to control wildfires, and he was encouraging the community to take matters into their own hands. He urged the local sheriff not to allow Forest Service personnel to intervene, which the sheriff publicly agreed to. Eventually, after public opposition, Congressman Pearce instead negotiated with the Forest Service and secured a permit for the thinning of one square acre by the community².

Last year, the Forest Service, again in the Lincoln National Forest, blocked access to a stream as part of the efforts to protect the endangered New Mexico Meadow Jumping Mouse. Several ranchers, with the blessing of their county commission, took down the barricades, saying that their cows needed access to that water and that the Forest Service had no jurisdiction over them and "their" land³.

Finally, a grazing permittee from the Gila National Forest, Adrian Sewell, went to Malheur during the occupation to support the Bundys. He returned to New Mexico saying that he would no longer pay grazing fees, that he did not recognize the federal government, and that he would defend his cattle to the death if the Forest Service tried to remove them⁴. He publicly tore up his grazing contract at Malheur, but after time passed, he ended up paying his renewal fees.

This kind of anti-government sentiment seems to be growing, and seems to be getting louder and more mainstream. New Mexico has seen several candidates for local office running on anti-federal platforms, and our State Land Commissioner, Aubrey Dunn, has been vocal in his support for the movement.

The conservation community is deeply concerned about this issue, and has found itself having to explain and defend the federal government's right to own and manage land in the first place rather than being able to focus exclusively on preserving special places and endangered species. The arrest and prosecution of those individuals involved in the incidents in Oregon and Nevada were absolutely crucial steps in beginning to reverse the trend of this movement.

Congress adds fuel to the fire though, when it reduces the budgets of the Interior and Agriculture departments, which allows local opposition groups (and local elected officials) to claim the federal government is not capable of management. Certainly this is the very aim of some members of Congress who are sympathetic to the movement and who *want* the anti-federal sentiment to pick up

¹ <https://www.alec.org/model-policy/resolution-demanding-that-congress-convey-title-of-federal-public-lands-to-the-states/>

² <http://pearce.house.gov/press-release/pearce-attending-emergency-tree-cutting-lincoln-national-forest>
http://www.wildearthguardians.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=7173&news_iv_ctrl=1194#.V1ru1aKrFrk
<http://pearce.house.gov/editorial/local-resource-management-increases-public-safety-creates-jobs>

³ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/may/12/new-mexico-board-orders-forest-service-gates-opene/>

⁴ <http://nmpoliticalreport.com/28623/nm-rancher-tears-up-grazing-contract-at-oregon-occupation/>

steam. But for those members of Congress who do not, ensuring the budgets of both departments remains healthy, and that the agencies can manage public lands in a robust, sustainable, and efficient manner, is one way to stem the tide.

Continuing to engage the public, being supportive of communities who face incidents like those at Malheur, and prosecuting extremists who break federal law, are other ways that Congress can help address this problem.

Again, thank you for holding a hearing on this issue. We would be happy to provide any additional input if we can. America's public lands are a wonder unmatched in the rest of the world. No other country preserves large tracts of land for the use and enjoyment of future generations without being specifically designated a national park. It is a beautiful legacy that Americans from New York City to Los Angeles know that the forests of Colorado, the deserts of New Mexico, the rivers of Idaho, and the wolves of Montana are maintained by their efforts and are available to them to visit and love whenever they wish to do so. That legacy should never be compromised by extremism.

Very Sincerely,

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