

Testimony for the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands

on

No More Standoffs: Protecting Federal Employees and Ending the Culture of Anti-Government  
Attacks and Abuses

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Opening Statement

My name is Peter Walker, a professor of Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Oregon. I personally observed the 2016 armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Harney County, Oregon. After the occupation I conducted research in Harney County for more than two years, including over 100 in-depth interviews with individuals representing all parts of the community. My observations are recorded in my book *Sagebrush Collaboration: How Harney County Defeated the Takeover of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge*.

A lot can be learned from the Malheur Refuge occupation for preventing such incidents, and for safeguarding federal employees and enabling them to work constructively in rural communities.

The great majority in Harney County opposed the Malheur occupation and rejected the militants' plan to launch an anti-federal government revolution from Harney County. (I use the word "militants" because they used armed force and military-style tactics to achieve a radical political goal.) The situation was explosive, and if the community had heeded the militants' call, the Malheur occupation almost certainly would have ended with many lives lost.

Harney County rejected the militants' call to revolution in large part because the community had invested for decades in building collaborative approaches to solving precisely the kind of resource management issues the militants said could only be resolved through armed force. In the past there *had* been a lot of hostility between the community and federal agencies. But by the end of the 1990s, Harney County was tired of fighting—and especially tired of litigation. The existing system was failing to produce outcomes that almost anyone wanted; and when people knew regulations would be coming, they wanted to get ahead of the process and make sure local

voices would be heard. Farmers, ranchers, environmentalists, tribes, and federal, state and county workers intentionally built a culture of collaboration. The community bet that better solutions could be found by building relationships and really *listening* to each other—humanizing those with whom they might see things differently. For decades, over countless one-on-one phone calls and cups of coffee at kitchen tables, the community created their *own* ways to solve problems. When outside militants proposed violent confrontation, the community had a better way.

Federal employees were central in this story. Ironically, the outside militants had no idea Harney County was recognized nationally as something of a poster child for collaborative approaches, including building positive relationships with federal workers. The militants believed vilifying and harassing federal employees would rally local support for their cause. The militants' leader later said he never met a Bureau of Land Management (or, by implication, *any* federal) employee who is a “good person.” By 2016, most people in Harney County just did not see it that way. Through collaboration, federal employees were contributing to better problem-solving in large part by making themselves more integral parts of the community, and by listening. No longer just uniforms and badges, federal employees were friends and members of the community. And Harney County does not like members of the community being harassed. When the Malheur occupation ended, ranchers with allotments on the Malheur Refuge held a dinner to honor the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service employees who had borne much of the harassment from outside militants, to reaffirm that the federal workers are valued members of the community.

As a nation we are enormously fortunate that by chance the militants chose Harney County. The community literally told the militants to “Go home.” We should see the relatively peaceful outcome of the Malheur occupation as hopeful evidence that conflicts between rural communities and federal agencies can be minimized, and in at least some cases win-win solutions can be found that defy the divisive culture that afflicts our nation today. But Harney County is much like many other places; the experience of collaboration in Harney County demonstrates principles that *can* be applied in other rural communities.

That is my most important message: in Harney County I saw that endless division and conflict do not have to define who we are as a nation and how federal employees work in our communities. There *are* other ways. America *can* do better. And Harney County proved it. Thank you.