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# Irony of Malheur refuge occupation seen in collaboration over federal land



The Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in central Oregon is home to the High Desert Partnership, a diverse group of ranchers, federal agency scientists and environmentalists representing more than 30 organizations. Since 2006, partners have launched restoration projects on 200,000 acres to benefit the wetlands that have historically supported hundreds of thousands of migratory birds. **Katherine Jones** The Idaho Statesman

BY JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

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On Oct. 27, a jolt of fear shot through federal employees across the West. A jury had just acquitted all seven defendants of charges filed over their armed takeover of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. After enduring strangers parked in their neighborhoods, telephone and online threats during the 41-day occupation, government botanists, foresters and information officers braced for another onslaught of intimidation.

On Nov. 9, a second jolt hit. After waging a bruising anti-government presidential campaign, Donald Trump was elected, triggering what the Southern Poverty Law Center reported as an immediate escalation in hate-filled harassment. The election also galvanized Republicans over a proposal to strip federal agencies of some of the land they manage, placing it instead in state ownerships that could ultimately privatize it for non-public use.

All of us have plenty to fear from the tyrannical takeover of public lands by armed militia and the land transfer movement, its political counterpart. Paradoxically, it is the federal employees in the cross-hairs of both aggressions who offer an alternative response to the West's land-use conflicts.

Among the ironies of the Malheur occupation is that this wildlife refuge hosts one of the region's more successful land management collaborations. The site the Bundy brothers and their cowboy cohorts chose to showcase government abuse is home to the High Desert Partnership, a diverse group of ranchers, federal agency scientists and environmentalists representing more than 30 organizations.

The partnership, which began with familiar exasperation over federal management, has evolved beyond the refuge in eastern Oregon. Since 2006, partners have launched restoration projects on 200,000 acres of forests and rangelands, and managed invasive carp to benefit the wetlands that have historically supported hundreds of thousands of migratory birds.

By channeling frustration into on-the-ground accomplishments, the High Desert Partnership is the antithesis of the Malheur takeover. Instead of a destructive trespass, the partners have shaped federal land management to benefit wildlife, cattle and timber operations.

The work by Malheur Refuge biologists and their rancher-logger partners also contradicts the argument for land transfers, adopted as a plank in the Republican national platform. Instead of the local financial losses cited by Republican leaders advocating reassigning large swaths of federal land to states, the High Desert Partnership has garnered \$14.6 million, which it has invested in job-producing range, wetland and forest restoration. Thirty-three other collaborations are doing similar work in Oregon and Washington.

Land-use alliances will not end the turmoil over federal management. Anyone who has tried to negotiate a timber sale or correct an ownership map knows the frustration of dealing with a remote bureaucracy and officials whose understanding of local issues often borders on opaque.

The conflicts that fueled the Malheur trespass are ubiquitous throughout far Northern California, where half the land is federally owned and Trump trounced Hillary Clinton in nine of 13 rural counties. Economic uncertainty and widespread unemployment, combined with regulations that seem irrelevant, have created a deep sense of disenfranchisement. The handful of forest community partnerships here and around the state are unlikely to assuage the rancor that has built up over the decades since the timber industry went bust.

But where coalitions are active, collaborating with federal land managers can make the difference between stagnation and progress, said Nick Goulette, executive director of the Hayfork Watershed Center. Partnerships are generating consistent jobs to a well-paid workforce, keeping the income local.

“What keeps me going is when I see people heading to work in the woods every morning,” Goulette said.

Federal employees are making these partnerships possible despite their fears. No one is harassed by collaboration. No one is bullied, and no one is kicked off the land by an inside money-making scheme.

The scariest thing about a working lands alliance is change.

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