

Protesters gather in Pullman to defy Bundy's message

Group stands in support of public lands

Shanon Quinn, Moscow-Pullman Daily News

About 10 people gathered Tuesday afternoon on the Glenn Terrell Mall on the Washington State University campus to stand in solidarity with those around the nation who support U.S. public lands.

The demonstration was a response to the armed takeover of Oregon's Malheur National Wildlife Refuge by a group of anti-government protestors. A standoff between the protesters - who want the government to relinquish rights to public lands - and federal authorities has been ongoing since early this month.

Hand-lettered signs declaring such sentiments as "Public lands belong to all," "Malheur is for cranes not criminals," "Stealing public lands is not for the birds" and "Speak with a book, be done with guns" accentuated the group's message.

"This happens to be a nature reserve that's set aside for protecting animals - migrating birds mostly," said Patrick Siler, a WSU professor emeritus and local artist. "It belongs to every American citizen and these are private individuals that want to take it over. They have their reasons for doing this, but obviously it's a very flawed outlook because they're actually stealing from every other American citizen."

Siler said he and some of the other demonstrators will be traveling Saturday to Malheur to protest against Bundy.

"We hope we don't catch any stray bullets, but we're going," he said.

Jessica Williams, a Pullman resident who organized the rally, said the care of public lands is an important issue on numerous levels.

"They are incredibly important for conservation," Williams said. "They provide economic benefits to the local communities where they exist. They preserve not just habitat - in the case of Malheur, they are part of preserving our human heritage."

Others who braved the Palouse's January chill and wind had their own thoughts on the subject, but all were supportive of the federal government's management of public lands.

Demonstrator Chris Ricketts said he has a personal reason for standing up against the protesters, led by Ammon Bundy.

"I have family who have lived in Burns for several decades. Whenever I go out there, they take me to the wildlife refuge," Ricketts said. "Not this year."

Ricketts said he hopes those occupying the refuge clean up their mess and "pay for the damage they've done."

On Jan. 11, the New York Times reported the armed protesters at Malheur escalated their defiance with the act of tearing down a fence at the far back end of the refuge using a Wildcat excavator stolen from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. They stated the fence had prevented ranchers from grazing cattle on public lands.

Pullman resident Lynn McCollough said the protesters in Oregon want to raise more cattle than their land can support.

"They need to run fewer head, or if that doesn't result in enough money, they need a new line of work," McCollough said. "They appear to be in a mental place that because they live out West, they live in a cowboy movie. Those times are gone. It's ridiculous that they expect the taxpayers to subsidize cowboy lifestyles when it's just foolish and inappropriate."

Other protests

According to The Associated Press, several hundred people rallied Tuesday in Portland - about 300 miles north of the remote refuge in southeastern Oregon - to demand Bundy end the occupation and to point out that federal management makes it possible for all kinds of people to enjoy public lands.

Protesters chanted "Birds, Not Bullies," a reference to the Malheur refuge's creation in 1908 as a preserve and breeding ground for native birds. The rally was organized by Oregon Wild, Portland Audubon and the Center for Biological Diversity.

"This occupation represents a threat to public lands," Bob Sallinger with the Audubon Society told the AP. "These are not political statements. These are crimes."

In Boise, more than 100 people attended a similar protest Tuesday in front of the Idaho Capitol. Ann Finley, a member of the Great Old Broads for Wilderness, said that the refuge is a special place.

"I love our free lands, and we're out here today stepping out and saying those lands should remain public," Finley said.

Conservation groups have also shown up at the refuge itself to demand that Bundy and his followers leave, and last weekend got into a shouting match with Bundy's group.