

Town watches warily as armed protesters take over refuge

By REBECCA BOONE, Associated Press

BURNS, Ore. (AP) — People in this rural eastern Oregon town are used to worrying about friction between the federal government and locals, but the armed takeover of a nearby national wildlife refuge is raising concerns to a new high.

Keith Landon, a longtime resident of Burns and employee at the Reid Country Store, said he knows local law enforcement officials who fear their kids will be targeted by angry militia members.

The mother of one of his kids is now involved with an officer, and they decided to send their children to another town after feeling threatened by an angry protester, Landon said.

"I'm hoping most of it's just muscle, trying to push," he said. "But it's a scary thing."

Armed protesters, who authorities say are coming from outside the area, took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge south of Burns on Saturday after participating in a peaceful rally over the prison sentences of local ranchers Dwight and Steven Hammond.

The Hammonds were convicted of arson three years ago for fires that burned on federal land in 2001 and 2006. They served their original sentences — Dwight, three months and Steven, one year — but an appellate judge ruled in October that the terms were too short under federal minimum sentencing laws.

Both men were ordered back to prison for four years each. They have said they plan to turn themselves in Monday.

The decision to send the men back to prison generated an outcry and plays into a decades-long dispute between some Westerners and the federal government over the use of public lands.

Brothers Ammon and Ryan Bundy are among those occupying the refuge. Their father, Cliven Bundy, was involved in a standoff with the government last year over grazing rights in Nevada.

Ryan Bundy told The Associated Press on Sunday that he hopes to turn over the land to local authorities so people can use it free of federal oversight. He said he hopes the takeover will prompt others to take action across the country to seize control of federally managed land.

Ammon Bundy has previously called on members of militia groups to take a stand with those at the refuge.

The FBI is working with local and state authorities to "bring a peaceful resolution to the situation," the bureau said in a statement late Sunday. It said it is the lead investigative agency and would not release details about the law enforcement response to ensure the safety of officers and those at the refuge.

At the property, several pickup trucks blocked the entrance and armed men wearing camouflage and winter gear used radios to alert those at the refuge buildings when reporters were allowed in.

Ryan Bundy declined to say how many people were at the site.

"The end goal here is that we are here to restore the rights to the people here so that they can use the land and resources. All of them," Bundy said.

That means ranchers can graze their cattle on the land, miners can use their mineral rights, loggers can cut trees, and hunters and fishers can shoot and cast, he said.

The Bundy brothers say the group plans to stay at the refuge as long as it takes.

"We're planning on staying here for years, absolutely," Ammon Bundy told reporters over the weekend. "This is not a decision we've made at the last minute."

If the situation turns violent, Ryan Bundy contends that it will be because of the federal government's actions.

"I mean, we're here to restore order, we're here to restore rights and that can go peacefully and easily," he said.

Harney County Sheriff Dave Ward said the group came to town under false pretenses.

"These men came to Harney County claiming to be part of militia groups supporting local ranchers, when in reality these men had alternative motives to attempt to overthrow the county and federal government in hopes to spark a movement across the United States," Ward said in a statement Sunday.

Landon, the longtime Burns resident, said he sympathizes with the Bundys' frustrations. Landon was a logger until the federal government declared the spotted owl a protected species in the 1980s, damaging the local logging industry.

"The spotted owl started the downfall of our community, then (President) Clinton made the Steens Mountains a wilderness area or whatever. Five generations of ranchers that had been on the Steens, kicked them off," he said. "It's hard to discredit what they're trying to do out there. But I don't want anybody hurt."

He said that on the surface, it doesn't look like much has changed in Burns, a high desert town of about 2,700 people.

"It's weird — I woke up this morning expecting the town to be crawling with this and that agency. But you don't see any of it. They're keeping a low presence," Landon said Sunday.

However, most of the hotels in the area are booked, and he's noticed that officers are doing their patrols in pairs instead of alone. The biggest difference since the takeover is the undercurrent of worry, he said.

"I'm glad they took the refuge because it's 30 miles away," Landon said. "I mean, they could have took the courthouse here in town."

