

IN MY VIEW

Don't imperil protection of public lands

By Tim Palmer, Published Mar 20, 2017

A bill introduced on Feb. 13 by Rep. Jason Chaffetz of Utah would “terminate law enforcement functions” of the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

This bill ironically comes as the second set of trespassers are on trial for the armed takeover and 40-day standoff against federal law enforcement officials at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

The bill calls for unspecified “block” grants to go to states for law enforcement on federal land — a specious directive at best. President Donald Trump has announced plans to severely cut domestic spending — not add to it. And, if you want to see what happens to federal money for local Western needs, consider funds to counties under the Secure Rural Schools Act, which have dried up.

National “security” is the mantra these days. Should we feel secure knowing that law enforcement on federal land, constituting half of Oregon, would become an unfunded mandate of the State Police? They're already \$32 million short of annual needs, according to an *Oregonian* report.

That means the job would revert to sheriffs of rural counties. But these are at the brink of bankruptcy. My own county, Curry, has cut sheriff's staff to the bone and considered closing the jail while somehow outsourcing the inmates. How would counties like this assume new enforcement duties on 33 million acres of Oregon?

The need, for federal land, is to improve enforcement by federal agencies, not eliminate it.

Undermining law and order is not expected from any politician. So what's Chaffetz's goal? Well, just before he introduced HR 622, he introduced 621, requiring the federal government to give 3.3 million acres to state governments. It's clear that such transfers would soon end in private hands; consider Oregon's decision last month to sell Elliott State Forest to the timber industry. And Oregon is a state where support for public land is strong.

Facing angry opposition from sportsmen who know the value of public land, Chaffetz withdrew HR 621. But 622 remains, with intent that can only be surmised as cynical: If federal employees can be prevented from doing their jobs, then the federal presence in the West will fail, and the path will be cleared for public property to be turned over first to states and then to oil, gas, and coal industries waiting, literally, in state capitals across the West.

Here's the other outcome: Local officers would enforce only the laws they like, or only the ones they have time to tend. In some parts of the West this would give Bundy-type anarchists a free pass in their gun-toting quest to claim our public land as their very own, just like they did at Malheur and at BLM property in Nevada earlier.

Most Westerners appreciate and use our public acreage for hunting, fishing, recreation of all kinds, sustainable resource jobs, sources of clean air and water, and open space out the back door, altogether making our communities livable, desirable, and attractive as both home and real estate. HR 622 would serve only to make law enforcement on that land a sham, and would open the world's greatest public estate to the forces of lawlessness, thugs and criminals. Vandalized outhouses, dumped garbage, and pirated timber will rank among the lesser crimes destined to become commonplace across the landscape we love.

Oregon Democrats oppose this proposal. The public affairs director for our one Republican congressman, Greg Walden, says he has not yet taken a position on the bill.

—Tim Palmer, who lives in Port Orford, is the author of "Rivers of Oregon" and other books about natural resources in the West.

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