

Dan Nichols Written Congressional Testimony

House Natural Resource Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands

Our nation is divided. Divisions exist between urban and rural America and within Congress. Simplistic red state / blue state depictions of this division only serve to aggregate conflict, reinforce polarization and harden lines that prevent collaborative and constructive problem solving in our communities. These divisions manifest themselves on the ground in many ways, including conflicts over natural resource management and militant anti-government protests like the occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. We can and must do better.

Being an individual with strong opinions I have come to appreciate that much can be gained by understanding and addressing the opinions of others. There are lessons to be learned from the armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, as well as Harney Counties experiences with the government's management of public lands resources. It is important to note that the majority of ranchers in Harney County did not support armed occupation of the Refuge. But at the same time, there are legitimate grievances with federal land management policies. Without a forum in which to air and address these concerns – and a fair, collaborative process by which to resolve them – we continue to push more people toward the hostile, unacceptable approaches adopted by individuals such as the Bundys. Much of what is often described as being “ antigovernment “ is really coming from a place of feeling excluded or on the losing end of unbalanced natural resource management.

There are many examples here in Harney County where the ranching and farming community has come together with multiple stakeholders – including the environmental community as well as state and federal agencies – to find common ground without vilifying each other. In fact, the common ground comes from learning to better understand one another. Oregon was ground zero for the spotted owl wars and the resulting ESA listing that caused irreparable damage to local communities and divided citizens. But more recently, the people of Harney County drew from this negative experience and worked with government and a diversity of interests to develop a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances that prevented the need for a similar outcome for Greater sage-grouse, which resulted in a 2015 decision to not list that bird.

Collectively, through collaborative efforts, Harney County residents have found the ability to meet our interests, while addressing the interests of the larger community of stakeholders, in the following examples

- The Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act of 2000
- The Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan
- The Harney County Wildfire Collaborative
- Eastside Forest Collaboratives including the Harney County Restoration Collaborative

This subcommittee should not pass up the chance to learn from these lessons of people bridging divides. It is an opportunity for Congress to develop a format for a much needed “larger discussion”. I ask for your support of a larger collaborative that will produce meaningful progress in addressing legitimate grievances. This is recognized as a successful approach to issue and conflict resolution in Harney County, the state of Oregon and should be on a national level as well.

