

THE CLEANSING OF THE BRUNEAU AND MARY'S RIVER COUNTRY OF UNWANTED PRIVATE INTEREST

You would think that in a state such as Nevada, where the federal government claims ownership of 87 percent of the land, government employees would be satisfied with all they control, but that's not the case. According to a study completed by the House Resources Committee, federal land holdings in the State of Nevada have increased by 3.7 million acres since 1964.

Some of this increase has been accomplished via land trades such as those that enable the BLM to trade a few acres laying within the city limits of Las Vegas for large tracts of ranch land in northern Nevada. But in addition there has been a good deal of land acquired by direct purchase assisted by The Nature Conservancy, The Farm Land Trust, the Elk Foundation, or other non profit organizations.

The use of non-profit organizations in land acquisition efforts has been very effective. Moneies can be raised, a cause promoted, and lands purchased, without there being the appearance of government involvement.

Lawful authority for such increases is highly questionable. Congress did make provisions for land exchanges, but the intent was for the benefit of those who settled the region, so that they might consolidate or block up their holdings, it was never intended that the government was to benefit. What the BLM and Forest Service folks have been doing is delaying any proposed trades that do not accomplish their own desired goals, while encouraging trades that put desired lands into the hands of the bureaucrats.

This scenario has had a devastating effect on mining and ranching. With government's ability to bring oppressive actions on mining and ranching comes the tendency to oppress for the purpose of creating "willing sellers" and "willing traders".

A good example was the suppressing of the Hawks family. Many people argue that the Hawks family sold their ranch and moved to Idaho simply because they wanted to relocate. They may have wanted to relocate alright, but no one can argue that it was the suppressive acts of FS and BLM agents that convinced them that such was their only alternative.

Vern and his family are not the only ones who are victims. Over the last several years it has become increasingly obvious that it is the intent of those within Nevada Division Of Wildlife, the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, that they gain complete control over all lands within the Mary's River and Bruneau River Basins. That would give them a corridor of government ownership from Interstate 80 all the way to the Idaho border.

I first became aware of some of what they were up to in 1983. We had purchased pasture from Kent Howard that year and had agreed that we would help gather in the fall. Kent at that time was summering his cattle in various allotments located all the way from the Charleston Reservoir to Miller Creek.

When Fall came, three of my children and I loaded our horses and went to Charleston to help "gather". When we reached Frank Prunty's place, at the north end of the valley, just north of Charleston, we unloaded our horses, and taking bed roles on our extra horses, we rode the last twelve miles down the river to Miller Creek where we stayed all night with Steve Pratt and his two boys. There was a nice log house and several log outbuildings at Miller Creek at that time. We arrived there in mid afternoon, and so after we had all unsaddled and turned the horses loose, the kids roped goats and went fishing in the Bruneau River.

Long before daylight the next day, Kent showed up with two men; driving up from Rowland that morning, and from there we started the gather, taking everything south toward Charleston.

Once we got the cattle to Charleston, at the Willow Creek Ranch, we then gathered Copper Basin, 76 Creek and the hills on both sides of Willow Creek.

The whole operation took about five days, of which the last two were spent "working" the cattle, (separating them into different bunches according to ownership). During those last two days, and when we were separating the cattle, there were quite a number of riders helping. Frank and Dick Prunty were there. Bob Prunty was there. Vern Hawks and two of his riders were there. Vern's range bordered to the east and he was there to collect any stray cattle that had crossed out of the head of the Mary's River Basin.

It was when we were gathering cattle in Copper Basin that I came on a mine cabin. I'll never forget it, it was a nice place, there were lots of quaken aspen trees with a spring close at hand. Everything was clean and well cared for. You could tell the people that were occupying the place were happy and enjoying their way of life.

As is the custom in our region, I stopped for the purpose of getting acquainted, and during the course of our conversation I learned that this was to be the last summer that these people would be spending there in the Copper Basin. The old miner told me that new regulatory requirements were forcing him to abandon his claim and that the Forest Service planned to destroy all of the buildings and whatever else was on the sight if he did not remove them himself.

It was not long after this that the issue of "wilderness designation" within Forest Reserves was concluded for Elko County.

One of the areas designated was an addition to the already existing Jarbidge Wilderness Area. Interestingly, when the addition was first proposed, it was understood that the boundary was to follow up 76 Creek past Frank Prunty's hunting camp where he and his son Dick conducted their business of guiding hunters every fall.

The Pruntys had no problem with that. They would still be able to access their camp and hunting could continue as it had in the past, but low and behold, after the Act was passed - no more than a week later - here came three Forest Service personnel with news to the contrary.

What Frank was told was, that unbeknown to the local Forest officials, when the plan for the wilderness addition was returned to them from Washington, they discovered that the boundary had been changed. Instead of the boundary line proceeding up 76 Creek past the Prunty's cabin as was originally intended, the line had been changed so that it now proceeded up the canyon along 76 Creek to a point below the cabin where a small side draw emerged going West. There, the new boundary line left 76 Creek and followed that draw for about 3/4 of a mile and then cut back over the ridge to 76 Creek.

This change was quite upsetting to the Prunty family. The camp was now just far enough into the Wilderness Area, that it was going to make it very difficult for them to get gear, grub and hunters to and from camp. And according to the Forest Service officials, the family would now have to either carry all of their gear by hand that last quarter mile or so to the cabin, or they would have to load everything on horses for that short distance only to unload it again when they reached the camp.

The new boundary line also created a health and safety problem, Many of the Prunty's clients were older people, and there had been instances in the past when emergencies arose. But of course these arguments meant nothing to the local Forest officials. The act and the law said that there was to be no vehicle traffic within a Wilderness Area, and that was the way it was going to be; there would be no more driving that last quarter mile to the camp even if there was a road there.

That was more than ten years ago, and today, in that same country, the miners are now gone. Kent Howard is gone (bought out by a combined effort of the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Nevada Department of Wildlife, and the Elk Foundation). Vern Hawks is gone, (bought out by one of the mines so that his ranch could be traded for lands to be mined upon). And as for the others who are still hanging on, the Pruntys, the Beitias and the Stowells, how much longer can they hold out against the tyranny that now exists.

So why has all this happened? Why are all the people being systematically removed from the land? When a close look is taken it becomes quite clear. The environmental movement of this century has benefited a variety of interest, but none more than the resource management agencies themselves. When the public at large is convinced that our Nation's range and wildlife are in jeopardy many things can be accomplished, including, increased budgets, increasing land acquisition, and greater control over resources.

With the regulatory powers they now have, it's not hard for the BLM or Forest Service to put a miner or rancher out of business. Any increase in cost of operation can lead to insolvency. Take a mining operation as an example, a ten day delay of certain activities can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. The agency people were quick to learn that if they were slow in getting an environmental impact statement completed, that the mining company would pay the cost just so that it would be completed in a timely manner.

At first it was just the impact statements that the mines were funding, but it wasn't long until the agency people learned that all kinds of favors could be extorted from these companies; a \$125,000 grant to help the Nevada Department of Wildlife buy the 7H Ranch; another grant to build miles and miles of fence along creek bottoms, so as to "protect riparian areas" (and help restrict the economic viability of certain ranching operations); a grant for a camp ground; on sight office space was provided for OSA staff and Environmental Protection Agency staff; and state agency budgets were supplemented. The mining companies were quick to learn that the best way to keep regulatory cost down was to "mitigate" the effects of their operations. (supplement agency budgets)

And then the land trades began. All of a sudden the miners learned that if they were to find a ranch that one of the agencies wanted, all they would have to do was buy that land or ranch and then propose a trade. That way the agency people were made happy, the rancher, who had decided it was not worth it, fighting the government year after year, got to sell his lands, and the mining company was relieved of a good deal of its regulatory cost.

And then came other proposals. The rancher who was forced out of the sheep business because of a Wilderness designation and could no longer make use of his isolated lands that lay high within the Forest, all of a sudden learned that he could sell his lands to one of the mining companies.

Lands located near Las Vegas were worth millions. A small parcel of unproductive desert land near Las Vegas or Wendover could be traded for thousands of acres of ranch land in the Northern part of the State. All that was needed was for the agency to find someone who might be interested in developing the land. When such a person learned that he could acquire a valuable parcel simply by buying

three or four ranches in Humboldt or Elko County and trade it to the BLM, he would be glad to cooperate.

So why is all of this so wrong? Well first of all, when good productive lands are turned over to the government they are not "protected" as the public has been convinced they will be. Government management is destructive. The whole concept that only government can protect wildlife is a fraud. Government in the United States is no more capable of managing resources than has been the Soviet Union or any other socialist nation. What government people manage; they destroy.

And second, what is happening is corrupt. It is corrupt not only from the standpoint that what, they have been doing is against the law, but also in the effect it's having. When the agency people see that they will gain more land for themselves via suppressive action it encourages them to do that very thing. The more that people are suppressed, the more gain there is for government.

It was never the intent of Congress that land trades be conducted so as to increase the holdings of government. Congress intended that lands needed for city expansion be put up for sale. Congress never intended that the process be delayed so as to force a desired land trade - its extortion. The same can be said about the land patenting process that is being held up by Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt. Its against the law! It was the intent of Congress that mining Companies be allowed the opportunity of patenting their claims so as to protect their investments, yet they are being held hostage by their own government just so the government can extort what they want from the mining companies.

So who is it that is acting unlawfully, and why is it that everyone seems so reluctant to do anything about it? Certainly, when persons in the private sector break the law they are punished. So why aren't the government people punished when they break the law?

Here are some reasons offered. First of all, the American people that live today are not of the same character as were those that went before them. Few people today will stand for principle. Most take an approach to life with only their own self interest in mind. Consequently most people today vote for those candidates who promise them something for nothing - which tends to put corrupt people into public office.

Moreover, there is the politics of government itself. With so many people now working for government they often act as the swing vote in any given election. If a candidate chooses to speak out against the power of government it will be difficult for him to be elected.

However it goes much deeper than that. If the mining interest within Elko County can be forced to spend millions of dollars to "mitigate" adverse effects that don't actually exist, why would it

not be logical that these same interest are "packing baggage" for the government in the political arena as well?

In other words, if certain political influence is exerted in a favorable way to government interest, wouldn't that make things go much better at the mine sight? The pattern and practice of mining officials over last several years demonstrates that such is the case.

The same can be said about the ranching community. Many within ranching have learned that if they keep their mouths shut and ignore much of what is going on around them, that things will go better for them; at times, even gaining a favor or two at the expense of neighbors.

American government is now the largest industry in the world. The assets of the U.S. Forest Service alone rank among the top five corporations in the United States. Government today, no longer responds to congressional inquiry. They don't have to - they are too powerful politically. If a politician takes a hard stand against the government it can make it very difficult for him to get re-elected. If a person in the private sector takes a hard stand against the government, they can be put out of business in no time at all. Much of it has already happened. The small miner and prospector are all but a thing of the past in the Western United States today. And as for people in ranching, they too are being put out of business, one at a time, day after day, year after year.

The enemy is not just those within government. It is everyone who will not stand against corruption - the politician who values getting re-elected above all else, the mining executive who puts his job and his company's gain before principle, the rancher who values staying in business more than he does standing up for a neighbor.

It is these people who are the enemies of all of us. And as it is today, it is they who are winning the battle.

*Cliff Gordon*