

Western 'Patriots' Clash with Feds on Land-Use Issues

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By Ryan Lenz and Evelyn Schlatter

DOLORIS, Colo. — Douglas Maxwell spun on his heels and opened the creaky door of his dusty, two-tone Ford F-150 to rifle through a stack of papers. Months after beginning his daily protest outside the Public Lands Office, the angry taxidermist was armed and ready to pick a fight.

"They think they can intimidate the American people? They can go to hell," he said, tugging on the bill of a "U.S. Border Guard" baseball cap. "Just the other day I told a forest ranger, 'Do you want another Ruby Ridge or Waco?' Because that's the way this is heading."

Lying there in the cab of his truck, as if to underline his seriousness, were a .357-caliber Magnum and a .32-caliber semi-automatic pistol.



Army of one: Douglas Maxwell, who has led local protests against the closure of national forest roads, says the conflict could lead to violence.

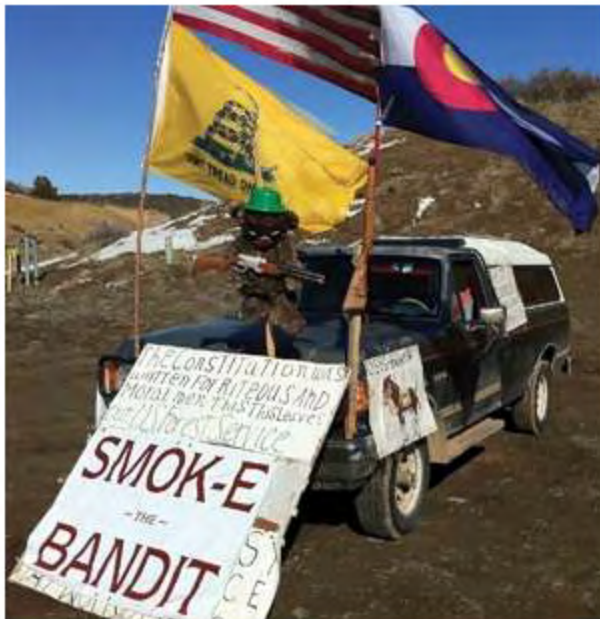
Each day at sunrise, Maxwell sets up signs on sandwich boards and on the side of his truck that warn of the death of the San Juan National Forest and paint the forest rangers who work there as donkey's asses. An ever-changing cast of supporters stops to exchange bits of intelligence about the federal government's latest maneuvers and its pending "crackdown" on dissidents. Humvees, the stories go, are quietly lining the roads outside Las Vegas in preparation for martial law — and concertina-wired prison camps are rising up in the surrounding deserts.

Ever since the U.S. Forest Service issued a draft plan last year to sharply limit motor-vehicle access to the 2.5 million acres of the San Juan forest, Maxwell and growing numbers of like-minded Westerners have been organizing against a

government they see as tyrannical. In Dolores County, Maxwell's compatriots have threatened to "arrest" federal officials. They've hanged Smokey Bear in effigy and demanded the return of "liberty."

What is happening in this sparsely populated and economically depressed southwest corner of Colorado is a reprise of other Western land-use uprisings of the past 40 years, including the "Sagebrush Rebellion" and the "Wise Use" and "County Supremacy" movements. But in a more immediate way, it is a part of the second wave of the [antigovernment "Patriot" movement](#) that roiled America and spawned much violence in the 1990s. And like that movement, it has blended issues of genuine concern, such as the federal management of Western public lands, with a staggering dose of radical-right conspiracy theories.

The rebellion is finding allies in local elected officials, some of whom argue — against well-established law — that they have a legitimate right to defy federal laws and regulations. In Montezuma County, the recently elected sheriff, who takes four-hour classes from a local "constitutionalist," appeared on a white supremacist radio show in February to assert that county sheriffs are "the ultimate law enforcement authority."



Bristling with images of weaponry, Douglas Maxwell's truck is the most visible sign of a resurgent antigovernment "Patriot" movement in the West. As in the past, the movement blends issues of genuine concern, such as use of public lands, with a wealth of bizarre conspiracy theories.

Joining him in opposing the Forest Service's proposed road closures are a legion of self-described Patriots — people who have subscribed to the idea that the government is leveraging Colorado's public lands against U.S. debt to China, or preparing the way for foreign troops to help impose martial law, or taking the first steps toward implementing a global socialistic government to be known as the New World Order. Others see the evil hand of the United Nations behind the move to close off public lands. That fear harkens to the 1990s, when Patriots commonly believed the U.N. was working to depopulate the United States in order to create an idyllic "biosphere" for animals.

Similar conflicts have sprung up in recent months in Idaho, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah and elsewhere. They are arising as the Patriot movement enjoys a powerful renaissance. The Southern Poverty Law Center [documented 824 Patriot groups](#), including armed militias, operating across the country in 2010. That's a startling 576% increase from the 149 groups active in 2008. It's also the most since the height of the first Patriot movement in 1996, when there were 858.

The land-use battles exemplified by the struggle in Dolores and Montezuma counties have led to political violence in the past. The 1990s were marked by attacks in the West on the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and similar agencies with oversight over federal lands. And Dolores is just 10 miles from the town of Cortez, where three extremists stole a water truck in 1998 and murdered a police officer who tried to stop them. They fled into the wilderness, where they were found dead, each a suspected suicide, months and years later. The armed vigil outside the Public Lands Office in Dolores is in many ways reminiscent of that dark and violent period.

Every so often, as Maxwell leaned heavily over the side of his pickup, a motorist from one of the surrounding communities would show support with a honk — all the validation Maxwell needs to support his resistance.

"They're raping us all," Maxwell growled. "So God bless America, and fuck the bastards. If they push violence on us, it'll come back on them. Guaranteed."

Patriot with a Badge

Montezuma County Sheriff Dennis Spruell is an unlikely figure at the forefront of the Patriot groundswell in Colorado. He was elected last year on a platform that romanticized him as an ironclad patriot ready to fight any federal effort seen by the radical right as an offense to the Constitution.



Montezuma County (Colo.) Sheriff Dennis Spruell, who takes weekly classes from a local "constitutionalist," is one of many speaking out against the federal government in Colorado.

"Warning: Sheriff Spruell reads the constitution," one election placard stacked neatly against a wall in his office reads. Another says, "Our modern day Knight" and depicts the sheriff as a burly medieval warrior. The signs are more than campaign rhetoric; with Spruell's election last year, the Patriot movement found a career lawman willing to champion its beliefs.

"I didn't give myself the constitutionalist title, but I wear it proudly," Spruell told the *Intelligence Report*. "I am standing up to the federal government because I think they are wrong. ... I love this country, and I don't want to see bureaucrats destroy it."

In many regards, Spruell is the epitome of a small-town Western sheriff. Affable, with folksy charm, he knows how to wear a smile. In his office, the mounted head of a 10-point buck competes for prominence alongside pictures of K-9 dogs named Zolton, Lobo and Justice — dogs Spruell used when he was a narcotics officer in the Cortez Police Department.

But the depth of his rage against the "incursion" of the federal government sets Spruell apart from his fellow law enforcement officers. He eagerly recounts the story of how he felt after seeing a bulldozed road during a hunting trip in the San Juan. Bulldozing roads is a technique used by the Forest Service to return forestland to a more natural state. But each destroyed road represents a bit more of the forest that is harder for hunters like Spruell to reach. "They accomplished nothing, except destroying Mother Earth, and that aggravated me," Spruell said. "And then I started hearing from all of my constituents, and I knew the fight was going to be on."



That was all it took for Spruell to embrace the idea of county supremacy, the belief that the county is the highest government authority. This idea originated with the [Posse Comitatus](#) — a violent, anti-Semitic and white supremacist movement that

sprang up in the early 1970s and provided much of the ideological underpinning for today's Patriot movement — although there's no evidence at all that the sheriff has any idea of its origins or any affinity for racist sentiments.

Now, every other Saturday, Spruell sits for a class on the "principles" of the Constitution with Michael Gaddy, former president of the New Mexico chapter of the [Minuteman Project](#), one of the first of the anti-immigrant groups to patrol the Mexican border in Arizona beginning in 2005.

"He knows more about the Constitution than I'll ever know," Spruell said one Saturday, after having just returned from the Western States Sheriffs' Association annual convention in Las Vegas, where the authority of sheriffs was a hot topic. "He's opened my eyes."

Spruell's enlightenment was on full display when he and Gaddy in February appeared on "[The Political Cesspool](#)," an unabashedly racist radio show that is hosted by James Edwards and features a Who's Who of the radical right as guests. (Spruell later said he was unaware of Edwards' white nationalist views.)



During the interview, Spruell threatened to arrest any federal agent in his county who, in his view, violates the Constitution. "The sheriff, he's the ultimate law enforcement authority because he's elected by the ultimate power, and that's the people," Spruell told Edwards. "If the federal government comes in and violates the law, it's my responsibility to see that it stops." He later told the *Durango Herald* that such violations could include closing or blocking forest roads.

Gaddy regaled Edwards' listeners with a hefty inventory of conspiracy theories that have long provided the kindling that ignites the Patriot movement. He claimed that federal land-use policies in the West are part of an orchestrated effort to hide the fact that mineral rights on public lands are being transferred to China.

When Edwards asked if he believed those ideas, too, Spruell said, "I'm not a conspiracy guy. ... But I wonder if that's not what they're trying to do to us."

Roads to Nowhere

Under the Forest Service's new rules for the San Juan, some 155 miles of roads are tagged for permanent closure. The agency also is erecting earthen berms and moving large boulders into place to block unauthorized trails, cutting off access to large swaths of backcountry used by hunters on all-terrain vehicles. The actions are intended to encourage the revegetation of damaged forestland and to protect wildlife habitat and the forest's streams. But residents of communities that have relied on the forest say they are being denied the resources, including food from game, that have long helped sustain them.

In the wake of those changes, a growing number of radical thinkers have emerged with claims that the federal government authority is limited by legal precedents related to an obscure, 145-year-old federal law called Revised Statute 2477. (The law was intended to promote the development of public lands in the West by granting, without federal review, rights-of-way across federal lands for road construction.) They come armed with binders of news clippings, government filings and antiquated interpretations of historical documents like the Magna Carta and the Constitution.

Ron Heaton in Dove Creek, Colo., and Dennis Atwater in Cortez, both retired, have done the lion's share of spreading the idea the federal government has insidious reasons for the land-use changes.

"We view our public lands differently than the rest of the nation," Atwater explained. "The lands are a way of life, and we depend on this land not only for our livelihood but also our happiness." (Atwater also told the *Intelligence Report* that he suspects a building in Durango is an outpost for a nascent one-world government led by the United Nations.)

These pseudo-intellectuals have looked to an increasingly broad body of modern polemics, including *Statehood: The Territorial Imperative* by William Redd and William Howell, published in 2005, and *War on Rural America* by Fred Kelly Grant. The books promote an idea that the federal government has vastly overreached by imposing its will on local governments.

During a town hall meeting earlier this year, about 200 concerned citizens filled the Dolores Community Center to listen to Howell and Redd, a former San Juan County, Utah, commissioner, give a four-hour lecture on the "first principles" of the Constitution and the "entitled sovereignty" of American citizens. They heard a rant about a loss of freedom and an evil government in their back yards.

"They want the West to be cleared of population," Redd yelled into a microphone, adding that the government has "some international treaties in place that will do it."

Dolores County Commission Chairwoman Julie Kibel, who has distributed Kelly's book and similar literature, said the public has a right to be informed. "We're not trying to incite a revolt; we're trying to prevent one. Our hope is that as we work through the issues, we're not giving the OK to take up arms."



Public anger over actions of the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management has been growing across the West, a reprise of earlier antigovernment movements.

The Rhetoric of Resistance

With all its bravado, the current resurgent movement in the West, at times, calls up memories of its own violent history. In 1994, a county commissioner in Nevada who likened the struggle over public lands to "a second Civil War" took a bulldozer to a forest road and refused to stop for two rangers who fled his approach. In the next two years, some extremists took a guerrilla-style approach in Nevada, bombing the Forest Service office in Carson City and the Bureau of Land Management office in Reno.

These acts of violence stand as testament to the threat posed when the rhetoric of war and resistance to federal authority reaches a crescendo and either a lone Patriot or a group takes the message to heart. While no violence has yet occurred in Colorado, with armed citizens sitting on a street corner threatening forest rangers by name, it's easy to imagine what could come.

The Forest Service and others in the community are increasingly aware that the current struggle in Colorado continues to heat up dangerously. "The difficult thing is to get by the heated rhetoric and feelings right now," said Mark Stiles, director of the San Juan National Forest. "There is definitely a segment of the community that is concerned about a loss of liberty."

Temperatures are rising over this specific grievance just as some of the most outspoken and prominent leaders of the nationwide Patriot movement are calling outright for violence and insurrection.

Sonny Frazier, the town manager in Dolores County's Dove Creek, said the "arrogance" of forest rangers working as law enforcement officers, dressed in flak vests and carrying tactical weapons, has left many feeling as if they already live in a police state where communities are slowly being robbed of their liberties.

The endgame is simple, Frazier said, before offering an ominous warning. "If you dress up like you're wanting a war, you're gonna get a war."