

Invoking local rights, Utah protesters cross into federal land



Critics of federal oversight of western lands demonstrate their displeasure Saturday as they cross into a canyon near Blanding, Utah, declared off limits to vehicles. (John M. Glionna / MCT)

By **JOHN M. GLIONNA**

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A local county commissioner here frustrated with what he called overreach by the federal government led a protest ride of several dozen all-terrain vehicles into a public canyon closed off by the Bureau of Land Management.

“It feels great,” said San Juan County Commissioner Phil Lyman after he rode two miles past a sign forbidding entry by motorized vehicles. “That line I crossed was a pretty arbitrary thing.”

The 50-year-old Lyman said the event was a way to assert county sovereignty over Recapture Canyon,

a remote site in southeast Utah.

The canyon is known for its archaeological ruins, which BLM officials say have been jeopardized from overuse. The canyon was closed to motor vehicles in 2007, the agency said, after two men forged an illegal seven-mile trail. Hikers and those on horseback are still allowed there.

Lyman and his supporters want the BLM to act more quickly on a years-old request for a public right-of-way through the area. “You can’t just arbitrarily shut down a road in San Juan County,” he said Friday night prior to the ride. “If you can do that and get away with it, what else can you do?”

The revolt has received national attention, coming on the heels of Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy’s successful standoff last month against the BLM that suggests a rising battle across the West over states’ rights on federally managed public lands. Tensions rose in Utah when earlier this week two men pointed a gun at a BLM employee on a state freeway.

One of Bundy’s sons and several armed citizens who had bore arms against federal officials in Nevada were at the Blanding protest, saying it was time to take back their government.

Many say both the Nevada incident and the Blanding protest are reminiscent of the so-called 1970s Sagebrush Rebellion, when communities in the West decried what they called the overreaching power of the federal government.

On Saturday morning, 200 people gathered at a local park where people waved American flags and carried signs that said “Transfer Federal Land to Western States” and “Disband BLM Paramilitary Units.”

A spirited public debate suddenly began when Lyman addressed the crowd. At first he said he had second thoughts about crossing into the BLM closed-off area. He said the protest had been planned long before the Bundy face-off in Nevada and that he believed the demonstration in Blanding had turned into a media circus.

“We’ve made our protest by gathering right here,” he said. “I feel no moral hesitancy to cross over into the federally controlled area, but the last thing I want to see is violence. Recapture Canyon is not about conflict.”

That’s when one of Cliven Bundy’s sons, Aamon Bundy, and several of his followers shouted out that the ride must go on to make a statement. “Let’s go down into that canyon,” he said. “That’s why we came here.”

One man called out: “Rosa Parks didn’t have a case until she sat in the front of the bus.” And another added: “The BLM has guns and mace and tasers and shackles, but we’ve got guns too!”

Then Bundy pulled out a pocket Constitution and addressed Lyman: “That canyon belongs to the people of San Juan County. You have every right to go in there. We thought you were going to head this group.”

But Lyman, dressed in jeans and an untucked blue dress shirt, still wasn’t convinced. Then Bundy made him mad. He said the politician was speaking “the language of weakness.”

“We are not speaking the language of weakness,” he shot back. “You are outsiders. I know the people here. There’s no language of weakness here.”

That’s when Lyman raised his hands. He instructed the group to ready their ATVs and led a parade of vehicles two miles outside town. Then they entered the canyon, ready to confront federal officials.

But none could be seen -- only a dozen or so San Juan County sheriff’s deputies on horses standing by in the scrub brush.

Sitting on horseback, Sheriff Rick Eldredge said that BLM officials were present but not in uniform.

“They don’t want any kind of clash today,” he said. “Our goal is to not have any repeat of what happened at Bunkerville, at the Bundy ranch, and I think we’ve achieved that.”

He said that he is worried about continued violence as Utah residents look for the next battleground against the federal government. “You have a lot of different opinions out here, so sure I’m worried about violence,” he said. “This is my county. I’m the sheriff.”

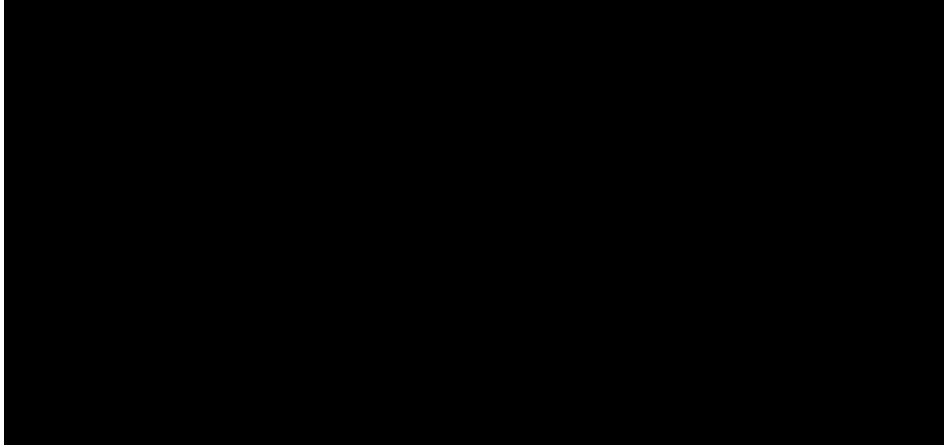
Earlier, Lyman breathed a sigh of relief after he jumped off his ATV, two miles past the federal line in the dirt. He said he hesitated to cross into the disputed area but saw his neighbors riding on ahead of him.

“I’m not going to stay back and watch my neighbors go ahead and fight for what’s theirs,” he said. “I’m going to go right along with them.”

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Hot-air balloon pilot struggled to contain fire before crash

By **DAVID ZUCCHINO**



A hot-air balloon in Virginia struck a power line and caught fire, the FAA said. (EPA)

The body of a person aboard a hot-air balloon that crashed in central Virginia on Friday night was recovered overnight by crews that continued to search a wooded area Saturday for the other two people inside the balloon when it struck a power line and burst into flames.

Amateur videos provided to Virginia State Police indicate that two people either fell or jumped from the burning balloon as it plunged to the ground, police spokeswoman Corinne Geller told reporters Saturday morning. There was little hope of finding either victim alive.

"We are now transitioning from a rescue operation to a recovery operation," Geller said.

The balloon pilot struggled to contain the fire and keep the balloon aloft, but it plummeted to the ground in flames just before 8 p.m., Geller said. Video taken by bystanders showed the balloon as it struck a live power line and was immediately consumed by orange flames.

Witnesses said they heard people in the balloon screaming for help.

"They were just screaming for anybody to help them," Carrie Hager-Bradley told TV station WWBT. "'Help me, help me, sweet Jesus, help. I'm going to die. Oh my God, I'm going to die,'" said Hager-Bradley, who said she saw the balloon in flames while on her way home from a grocery store.

Geller said of the two people seen falling to the ground: "Whether they leapt on their own or fell, we don't know."

Debra Ferguson told the Free Lance-Star of Fredericksburg that she saw balloons landing safely in a field near her yard, then saw another balloon in trouble.

"As soon as we looked up, the thing blew up right there," Ferguson said. "All I heard was, 'Oh my God, oh my God,' and all you saw was the top of the balloon still flying, but all of the basket was gone.

"All of the flames just disappeared. It was like a match -- poof -- and then it was gone."

Search crews aided by canine teams conducted a grid search Saturday morning in a debris field near the balloon's intended landing site in a field where two other balloons landed safely Friday night. Searchers were hoping to find the remains of the gondola and the balloon, which separated after the aircraft caught fire, Geller said.

The balloons went airborne as part of a "Friday Flights Happy Hour" at the first Mid-Atlantic Balloon Festival, which organizers said was canceled after the deadly accident. Event planners had expected up to 20,000 people to attend the event Saturday and Sunday at Meadow Event Park in Doswell, Va., north of Richmond. Twenty hot air balloon teams were to attend, according to the event's website.

Greg Hicks, a spokesman for Meadow Event Park, appeared at a Virginia State Police news conference but offered few details. "It's just a shocking event for everyone," he told reporters.

The body that was recovered just before midnight was transported to the state medical examiner's office for identification. Geller said police have the names of all three balloon occupants and have been in touch with their families. The names were not released.

Two Federal Aviation Administration investigators were at the scene Saturday, joined by representatives of the National Transportation Safety Board, Geller said. The agencies are investigating the circumstances and cause of the accident.