

Battle over public lands rages on

By Kirk Johnson, New York Times

BURNS, Ore. – A year ago, this corner of rural Oregon became center stage in the drawn-out drama over public lands when armed militia leaders seized a national wildlife refuge, arguing that the government had too much control of land in the West.

Now that President Trump is in office, people here and in other parts of the 11 states where 47 percent of the landmass is publicly owned are watching to see what he will do on everything related to public lands, from coal mining and cattle grazing to national monuments and parks. In Burns, some ranchers and others are feeling emboldened, hopeful that regulatory rollbacks by the federal government will return lands to private use and shore up a long-struggling economy.

But the change in administration has also spawned a countermovement of conservatives and corporate executives who are speaking up alongside environmentalists in defense of public lands and now worry about losing access to hunting grounds and customers who prize national parks and wildlife.

In Idaho, for example, a deal to put thousands of acres into private ownership – exactly the sort of transaction that the militia leader brothers, Ammon and Ryan Bundy, had espoused in seizing the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge – was met with fierce opposition, by no less than a group of conservative outdoorsmen.

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