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Ranchers report to prison as sheriff calls for end to ‘armed occupation’

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The father-and-son ranchers whose legal battle spurred the takeover of a federal wildlife building in eastern Oregon reported to prison Monday as the local sheriff called on armed militants to “end this peacefully.”

Harney County Sheriff David M. Ward said at a press conference that Dwight and Steven Hammond, the father-and-son ranchers whose legal battle over arson convictions spurred the protest, reported at 1:37 p.m. Monday to the U.S. Bureau of Prisons in California.

“I want to talk directly to the people of the wildlife refuge. You said you were here to help the citizens of Harney County,” Sheriff Ward said at a press conference. “That help ended when a peaceful protest became an armed occupation. The Hammonds have turned themselves in. It’s time for you to leave our community and go home to your families and end this peacefully.”

Even so, militants showed no signs of vacating the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters as the occupation entered its third day.

Occupation leader Ammon Bundy repeated his call at a press conference Monday for a panel to investigate the conviction, saying the Hammonds had been forced to report to prison “for a crime they did not commit.”

“Myself and many, many, many others for weeks on end put all the energy we possibly could to try to keep them from having to go back into this prison, and we feel we have exhausted all prudent measures and have been ignored,” said Mr. Bundy, who said the group is called Citizens for Constitutional Freedom.

Mr. Bundy has said the group will not engage in violence unless confronted by law enforcement. The FBI has taken the lead in handling the occupation with an estimated several dozen militants at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge near Burns, Oregon.

Several occupiers posted video online asking for supporters to join them, saying, "That's what's going to prevent any bloodshed, the more people that get here."

"We don't want bloodshed, we all want to make it home to our families, and I believe they want that on the other side as well," said Jon Ritzheimer in a video filmed in a truck outside the headquarters and posted on The Oregonian website.

The Hammonds, meanwhile, have since moved to distance themselves from the occupying group.

Attorneys for the Hammonds, who have previously said that the occupiers do not speak for them, released a statement Monday saying that their clients "respect the rule of law."

"Dwight and Steven Hammond respect the rule of law. They have litigated this matter within the federal courts for over five years and, in every instance, have followed the order of the court without incident or violation," said the statement from attorneys W. Alan Schroeder, Kendra M. Matthews and Lawrence Matasar.

The attorneys said they will seek executive clemency from President Obama for their clients, who had already served sentences but were resentenced to an additional five years for a 2006 accident in which a prescribed burn on their property spread onto federal land, charring 127 acres.

Prosecutors sought the additional sentence under the federal Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, which prompted an outcry from ranchers and others who described the penalty as overkill.

Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow with the libertarian Cato Institute who lives near Bend, Oregon, called the five-year sentences "totally insane."

"This sets a terrible precedent because anybody who owns land in the West is going to be near federal land, and a lot of those landowners need to burn their land to prevent fire hazards from developing, because if you don't burn, you get a huge buildup of fuel," Mr. O'Toole said. "So you have to burn, and now the precedent is if your burn laps over onto federal land on just one acre, you go to jail for five years."

Dwight Hammond, 73, previously served 12 months' time for the arson conviction, while his son Steven, 46, served three months. They were also fined \$400,000.

The occupation began Saturday after a rally that drew about 300 supporters of the Hammonds, including three sons of Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy, who drew headlines for his 2014 standoff with federal authorities over grazing fees.

“This began as a peaceful protest that took an unfortunate turn when some of those folks broke off and began an armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge,” Sheriff Ward said.

He said the safety of Harney County’s roughly 7,000 citizens was his “top priority.”

Sen. Ted Cruz, Texas Republican, also urged the protesters to “stand down peaceably” in order to avoid a “violent confrontation.”

“Every one of us has a constitutional right to protest, to speak our minds,” Mr. Cruz said in Iowa, according to NBC News. “But we don’t have a constitutional right to use force and violence and to threaten force and violence against others.”