

Group objects to 'anti-government' event featuring Ammon Bundy in Montana

Phil Drake

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A federal judge has dismissed the case against Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy and three other men. Their charges stemmed from a standoff with federal authorities back in 2014 over cattle grazing rights. Wochit

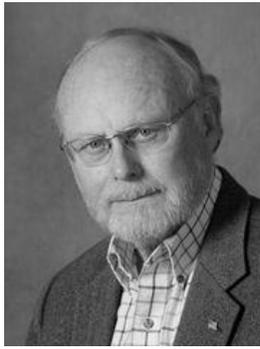


(Photo: John Locher, AP)

HELENA – An Oct. 13 event in Whitefish that says it will highlight property and civil rights is coming under criticism from several groups, saying it will feature anti-government conspiracy theorists and is an affront to public land.

The organizer of the conference said the event is none of those things and criticized her critics.

Speakers at the “New Code of the West” event sponsored by This West is OUR West include Ammon Bundy, leader of the armed occupation of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and a participant in a standoff against law enforcement officials at his father Cliven Bundy’s ranch in Nevada, critics said.



“By inviting Ammon Bundy, organizers and participants of this event are attempting to normalize the seizure of public lands and to legitimize threats against federal and local law enforcement,” Bob Brown, a state legislator for 27 years, former Montana secretary of state and a Whitefish-area resident, said in a Sept. 27 news release opposing the conference.

He said the event “flies in the face of the values Montanans of all political persuasions share” and has no place in Montana.

Photo Bob Brown

Bob Brown (Photo: File photo)

Others listed on the news release include the Montana Wilderness Association, some Whitefish city officials, the Montana Human Rights Network, Rep. Shane Morigeau, D-Missoula, a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and former state lawmaker Carolyn Pease Lopez, a member of the Crow tribe.

“This event is targeting American Indian people across the state and the West,” Pease Lopez said. “We must stand together undivided against bigotry and any efforts to insert anti-Indian sentiment into the political mainstream.”

Laura Lee O’Neil, the main organizer of the event and founder of [“This West is OUR West,”](#) took issue with the allegations.

“While I respect their First Amendment right to speak, I most assuredly do not agree with the disparaging name-calling used in this ‘Press Release.’” she said in an email. “Our event is in no way advocating nor supporting an extremist, violent, anti-government, anti-Indian agenda.”

“I personally have great respect for our country’s Constitution, and am simply exercising my First Amendment right in promoting a civil dialogue and discussion on issues important to us here in Montana and throughout the Western states,” she wrote.

The This West is OUR West website states the country is under threat of federal government overreach, the removal of state jurisdiction and protection and falling victim to international global agendas.

“We share common concerns, provide useful information and offer networking capabilities among the voices across the West,” the website states.

The website states the event will be 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. event at the Grouse Mountain Lodge and will look at “land, water, property and civil rights in the Western United States.”

Elaine Willman, which the critics of the event said is one of the most well-known anti-Indian activists in the country through her work with the Citizens Equal Rights Alliance, will also speak.

Another person listed to speak is Rep. Kerry White, R-Bozeman.



White, according to his biography on the event website, introduced a bill that was signed into law in 2017 urging the U.S. Congress to release certain wilderness study areas in Montana from consideration for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation system, calling for dropping nearly 1 million acres from possible federal wilderness consideration.

White said Monday he did not know the list of speakers when he was asked to discuss the health effects of wildfire smoke.

Rep. Kerry White, R-Bozeman

Rep. Kerry White, R-Bozeman (Photo: Courtesy)

"I thought this was an educational event but it seems the press release has labeled this as an anti-government event," White said via email. "Not what I had in mind when I accepted several months ago to show my presentation on the health effects of these wildfires. Anti government is not my position."

He said he would contact the organizer to get more details on the purpose of the event.

He also defended a Facebook post when he was planning to go to Nevada during the standoff that involved the Bundy family.

"It was not to support Bundy and in fact my post explained clearly that several legislators were going to attempt to bring a peaceful end to the situation," White said.

Another state official scheduled to speak is Rep. Matt Shea, R-Wash.

The Montana Human Rights Network has said This West is OUR West is rooted in the militia movement of the 1990s and "espouses an ideology at the nexus of the anti-government, anti-Indian, and anti-environmental movements."

O'Neil disagreed.

"As is stated on our website, This West is OUR West promotes 'Uniting Western States, Protecting Our Rights.' And, since those God-given rights are clearly stated in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution, under which our government is structured and regulated, we are in no way anti-government," she said.

O'Neil said it was "shameful that some must resort to name calling and untruthful slander simply because others may have differing opinions."

She said Montanans prefer unity over the division "and celebrate our right to peacefully assemble and speak freely and respectfully."

Montana Wilderness Association, in partnership with Montana Wildlife Federation, Montana Human Rights Network, and Love Lives Here, will have an event on the same

day as New Code of the West. It is called Montana Undivided: A Rally for Human Rights and Public Lands.

The event will be 10 a.m. Oct. 13 at Depot Park in Whitefish.

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To know more

To know more about This West is OUR West, go to: <https://bit.ly/2zKAhVp>