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## **Environmentalists sue to stop feds from renewing grazing permits to Dwight and Steven Hammond**

By [Valerie Richardson](#) - *The Washington Times* - Monday, May 13, 2019

Environmentalists filed a lawsuit Monday challenging the Interior Department's decision to reissue grazing permits to the father-son Oregon ranchers who inspired the 2016 occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

Former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke renewed in January the grazing permits of Dwight and Steven Hammond after they were pardoned by President Trump in July 2018 for setting two brush-clearing fires that spread to federal property and burned 137 acres.

The Hammonds were each sentenced to five years in prison under a federal anti-terrorism statute, a sentence decried by ranchers as excessive that became the rallying cry for the 41-day standoff led by Ammon and Ryan Bundy at the refuge near Burns, Oregon.

The lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in Portland argued that Mr. Zinke's decision violated federal rules requiring permittees to exhibit a "satisfactory record of performance."

"Secretary Zinke hijacked the public process for political reasons and ordered the local land managers to go against their own judgment and renew the grazing permit for public land permittees who had violated federal regulations," said Erik Molvar, executive director of Western Watersheds Project. "The American public deserves better than management-by-decree, and we're asking the court to order the agency back to the drawing board to ensure the decision complies with federal law."

Also challenging the decision to reissue the grazing permits were WildEarth Guardians and the Center for Biological Diversity.

"It's appalling to watch the Trump administration make up the rules as they go along," said CBD executive director Kieran Suckling. "We've seen this type of lawlessness infect all aspects of public lands management under Trump, and we're going to fight it."

The Bureau of Land Management cancelled the Hammonds' grazing permit in 2014, citing the two fires that spread to federal lands, but Mr. Zinke said the pardons had altered the rationale.

"I find the pardons constitute unique and important changed circumstances since the BLM made its decision," Mr. Zinke said in the decision.

Among those who applauded the move was the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, which issued a Jan. 28 statement saying that reinstating the permits was the "final step in righting the egregious injustices the Hammonds faced."

“This is the culmination of years of effort on behalf of this industry to restore a family’s livelihood,” said the NCBA.

The Hammonds have said they were not involved in the Malheur occupation, which occurred while they were in jail. One protester, Robert “LaVoy” Finicum, was shot and killed by authorities at the end of the standoff in February 2016.