

Public Lands Belong to All Americans

The recent incident in Nevada over the removal of unauthorized cattle from public lands garnered extensive national attention. It is unfortunate that this particular incident escalated into a "call to arms" to those disagreeing with the actions taken by the Bureau of Land Management, a Federal agency in the U.S. Department of the Interior. The incident quickly turned into an explosive situation with a high potential for serious injury or loss of life.

The BLM stopped the gathering of the cattle and withdrew its employees. BLM's decision has been characterized as a "victory" by the protesters and militias and they have been congratulated by some for their courage in standing up to the Federal government.

We disagree with this assessment. It took a great deal of courage on the part of the BLM to step down and put the safety of the public and employees first. It is not courageous to threaten the lives of employees and their families who are working within the law, their authorities, and who are enforcing court orders. To quote author Mary Anne Radmacher¹, "Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes it is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, 'I will try again tomorrow'." The Nevada case will continue to be pursued in various venues and, hopefully, brought to closure in a civil manner.

The Nevada incident once again renewed a long-standing debate about the rationale for having public lands and the Federal government's role in management of public lands today. That debate is not a new one. It has been addressed by multiple Congresses and Administrations, litigated in the courts, dealt with administratively through published regulations, and explained daily by BLM employees to those interested in public lands or seeking to conduct activities on public lands.

The debate over the role of the public lands, which belong to all Americans, will no doubt continue. But we are a nation of laws. And, the laws require enforcement. There are mechanisms in place for change in our system, but violence and threats should not be used, condoned or supported. A civil, rational discussion does not occur on the open range, with weapons pointed.

¹ Mary Anne Radmacher is an artist, professional speaker, and the author of "Courage Doesn't Always Roar" and other books and writings.
