

# Oregon militants: Death threats from ranchers reported years before standoff



[\[http://connect.oregonlive.com/staff/dtheriault/index.html\]](http://connect.oregonlive.com/staff/dtheriault/index.html) By **Denis C. Theriault** | **The Oregonian/OregonLive**

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Years before the arson fires that sent two Oregon ranchers to **federal prison** [\[http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2016/01/oregon\\_ranchers\\_at\\_center\\_of\\_m.html\]](http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2016/01/oregon_ranchers_at_center_of_m.html) — sparking an **armed occupation** [\[http://topics.oregonlive.com/tag/showdown%20in%20burns/\]](http://topics.oregonlive.com/tag/showdown%20in%20burns/) of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge — federal officials reported several death threats from the men.

Those accusations, which reportedly stretch back to the 1980s, first emerged in August 1994.

That's when Dwight Hammond Jr., now 73, and his son, Steven, now 46, wound up arrested by U.S. Fish and Wildlife officers after trying to stop federal workers inside Malheur from fencing off a canal they'd been using to water their cows.

Details about that fight — and the threats that reportedly preceded it — show just how long the Hammonds have been scrapping with the government over access to the refuge that borders their lands. And they make clear that the recent bubbling of bad blood that's drawn sympathetic militants to Oregon's desert is nothing new.

Earl Kisler, the special agent who arrested the Hammonds in 1994, detailed some of the death threats in a sworn affidavit soon afterward. The affidavit surfaced as part of the Hammonds' 2012 arson case but remained under a court seal as of Wednesday.

But in an interview with The Oregonian/OregonLive, Kisler confirmed the history of threats. He said the dispute over the fence grew so heated that he and his partner agent were called from Wilsonville to Harney County to serve as a "small protection detail."

"There had been so many threats against refuge people," he said. "They were trying to finish the boundary fence, and Dwight Hammond had vowed he wasn't going to let that happen."

An **article published by High Country News** [\[http://www.hcn.org/issues/20/582\]](http://www.hcn.org/issues/20/582) in 1994 said officials at the Malheur refuge had amassed a "thick" file detailing death threats against refuge managers — in 1986, 1988 and 1991.

Forrest Cameron, who served as the refuge's manager in 1994, didn't return a message seeking comment Wednesday.

A 1995 **article published by The Village Voice** [\[http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/01/05/showdown-in-the-malheur-marshes-the-origins-of-the-armed-occupation-in-burns-oregon/\]](http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/01/05/showdown-in-the-malheur-marshes-the-origins-of-the-armed-occupation-in-burns-oregon/), citing Kisler's affidavit, said Dwight Hammond "threatened to kill" Cameron and his assistant manager, Dan Walsworth, and that Hammond had "claimed he was ready to die" over the fence

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line.

Kisler said the tensions boiled over Aug. 3, 1994, when workers who showed up to finish the final links in the boundary fence found one of the Hammonds' large dirt scrapers blocking their way.

Federal officials were out fiddling with the disabled scraper for some time, Kisler said, before the Hammonds showed up to taunt them with obscenities and vitriol.

"We made it clear they could call us any name in the book, and that was fine, as long as they didn't interfere any further with this fence crew," Kisler said.

Later, as a truck hauled the scraper away, Hammond walked down to the work site and confronted Kisler, hoping to get arrested, Kisler said.

"I literally drew a line in the sand," said Kisler, adding that he didn't want to make the long drive back to Portland with Hammond in custody. "I told him, 'If you cross that line, you're going to leave me no choice.'"

And yet?

"As soon as I said that, he jumped over that line," Kisler said. "And that was it."

Court files show the Hammonds faced felony charges that included intimidating and interfering with federal employees. The charges were reduced to misdemeanors and then dropped in 1997.

A longtime attorney for the Hammonds, Larry Matasar, declined to comment on the 1994 arrest or the reports of death threats. A woman who answered the phone at the Hammond family home said Dwight Hammond's wife, Susan, who was present during the 1994 arrest, wasn't available for comment.

More threats followed the arrests, Kisler said, but this time from Hammond sympathizers — some of whom had taken to the streets in protest. Those years-old demonstrations, drawing supporters and militants from across the West, had echoes in Saturday's protest in Burns.

"At one point, they had a homemade sign that had all of our names, refuge people's names, my name, my partner's name," said Kisler. "Luckily, my partner and I, we both had unlisted numbers."

The Village Voice reported that one Hammond supporter had called Cameron, the Malheur manager, and "threatened to wrap the Camerons' 12-year-old boy in a shroud of barbed wire and stuff him down a well."

Kisler remembers hearing tales of death threats against federal officials by other Harney County ranchers angry over new grazing rules at Malheur as early as the 1970s.

"This sort of volatile situation on Malheur is nothing new," he said. "It's been going on for generations."

— Denis C. Theriault

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