

Black Hat Sagebrush Rebel

The unassuming cowboy from southern Utah, Leland Pollock, carries a western wallop that has altered political landscapes from rural Utah to the halls of Congress. By Marjorie Haun

Looking out over blonde alluvial fields lying between gunmetal-gray igneous peaks in Garfield County, one can't help but think that God designed this place for grazing. Settled by Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) pioneers in the mid-1860s, this small county in the heart of southern Utah has been home to loggers, farmers, miners and ranchers for a century and a half. But since 1996, this turf has been ground zero in the battle over the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (GSE), created by President Clinton with no input from local stakeholders. Although Clinton's proclamation assured that existing ranches and grazing rights would not be impacted, slowly the tens of thousands of cows that once grazed this vast tract of sagebrush and stone were purged from the land.

With environmentalist lawsuits and oppressive federal policies rupturing the local economy, bankrupting public schools, and threatening to erase an entire way of life, in 2016 Garfield County got a welcome break

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with the election of Donald Trump. In December of 2017, Trump eased the federal stranglehold of the monument by reducing its size and redefining its management. None of that would have happened without the 21st century sagebrush rebels who arose out of the red dirt and took a stand for freedom. With doggedness, a mind on overdrive, and a knack

for fighting militant pressure groups, Garfield County commissioner and rancher Leland Pollock led the way.

Taking a Stand

Garfield County is known to outsiders for its eye-popping Bryce Canyon National Park. Blessed with the reddest dirt anywhere and eroded earthen towers that puncture a cerulean sky, this destination brings in visitors from all over the world. In harmony with logging, ranching, and extraction industries, tourism has been a staple of local economies for decades. Ironically, Clinton's guerilla designation of the GSE would sound the death knell for thousands of jobs, and plunge Garfield County into an economic abyss. As bad as the loss of timber and mining were in the early days of the monument, it would get worse during the Obama years. "There's a lot of war we've fought in," Leland says, "but Obama, with his radical overreach, pushed it to the limit. He backed a bunch of us into a corner, and that's all we could take."

Growing up within the boundaries of Bryce Canyon as the son of a National Park Service employee, Leland has always been involved in range and resource management. It was the unprecedented management model of GSE that made it particularly onerous. National monuments are ordinarily managed by NPS, but inexplicably, the GSE was unloaded on the Bureau of Land Management. "The BLM was created to manage grazing, not monuments," Leland explains. "Several BLM officials told me off the record they had no idea how to manage a monument."

He continues: "When they made this a monument it was for all the wrong reasons. Clinton did it to reward liberal-left special interests, and he did it to stop the Analex Coal Mine. He met with the environmentalists, drew a map of this incredible swath of land in southern Utah, and threw it in the lap of the BLM. That's why it's been so dysfunctional."

Running for county commissioner in 2008, Leland was swept along with a wave of rural candidates from across Utah who felt they needed to step up. "There were a lot of county commissioners from southern Utah

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Leland's wife, Michele, and the "golden pup" grandson, Kaison, help run the multigenerational ranch near Bryce Canyon National Park.



Leland pushes cows while riding his paint, Blackie, near a solar array that powers the well system he built with the help of Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative.

With Garfield County Sheriff Danny Perkins (left) and rancher Dell LeFevre (right), Leland speaks about public lands' issues.



who had never been involved in politics. It was that time that several of us elected officials banded together and fought back."

Utah representative and former BLM employee Mike Noel was a powerful and important ally of the cowboy commissioners and helped them grab the attention of Utah's governor and U.S. senators and representatives. This headstrong band of cowboys gave a voice to the rural folks who had been crushed by executive proclamations and radical activists, and Leland, with his depth of knowledge and simple eloquence, would magnify that voice on the stage of national politics on Capitol Hill.

Black Hat Triggered

During the waning years of the Obama administration, the House Natural Resources Committee was chaired by Republican Rob Bishop, a representative from Utah and long-time friend of Leland. Sporting his "cowboy formal" black hat, Leland's first appearance in front of Congress in 2014 was to sound the alarm bell for the region's dying communities. He said, in part:

"Public lands, monuments and parks are a wonderful thing.... Unfortunately, over the past few decades, enjoyment of public land and park resources by current generations has suffered at the hands of those who believe federal lands should be managed to lock people out and prohibit reasonable visitation and access. It has suffered due to a misguided notion that the best management comes from agency heads who are significantly influenced by special interests and political lobbying. For the past 21 years, Garfield County has been forgotten by federal managers thousands of miles away who do not under-

stand the impact the monument has had on the lives of real people in southern Utah. As a county commissioner I must speak up for those forgotten families, forgotten stewards of the land, forgotten hunters, ranchers, and tourists, those who are clinging to a life they once knew and that could be restored if those people had a voice that was heard in Washington, D.C."

Between 1996 and 2015, enrollment in Garfield County's public schools dropped by

The Demise of Dan Love

A practical and honest man, Leland doesn't automatically see employees of the BLM and Forest Service as adversaries. But back in 2009, the feds ignited a firestorm in nearby San Juan County with militaristic antiquities' raids that led to the suicide deaths of several men. The aftermath of the BLM's "Operation Cerberus," led by disgraced officer Dan Love, hypercharged Leland's fighting spirit. He says, "You fight back when you have folks like the Redd family who look you in the eye and tell you, 'Dan Love killed our dad.'"

Leland's leverage with local and national leaders has not always been open to public scrutiny, but there's no doubt he had a role in purging and relocating some of the worst players from the BLM. Dan Love himself appears to have given Leland credit for his ouster. On the day he was fired from his post as regional BLM law enforcement director, Dan Love texted the following to Leland:

"I owe you a message. Today I accepted another opportunity. Tip a beer, your assignment is complete."

two-thirds. In the spring of 2015, the school district asked the commission to declare a local "state of economic emergency." Leland says: "Our number one export is our children, and that's because 93 percent of the landmass in Garfield County is federal land. They took 500 jobs with one whack when they closed the Kaibab and Escalante sawmills. They've shut down all the mines. They've reduced the amount of cattle we can run by half. Garfield County is the size of Connecticut and 93 percent of it is 'the land of no use.' There's no way we can grow, and that's by design."

It was also in 2015 that environmentalists started pressing President Obama to create the Bears Ears National Monument in southeastern Utah. Foreseeing another immense landgrab in the works, Leland and others in his hometown posse began to lobby Washington. Nevertheless, three weeks before Obama left office, while on vacation in Hawaii, he delivered the 1.3-million-acre monument to his left-wing base.

Hope was not lost, however. During the prior year, Leland and the Utah posse were able to capture the ear of Donald Trump Jr., an ardent outdoorsman who often travels to Utah to hunt. Astonishingly, following President Trump's election, it became clear that the businessman from Queens understood rural Utahns better than any prior recent president. Loaded for bear, eyes peering under the rim of his black hat, Leland again appeared before the Natural Resources Committee in December of 2017, just days after President Trump scaled down the GSE and Bears Ears monuments. Stung by the political loss, Democrats on the committee were apparently so flummoxed by the sight of Leland's black hat that

they insisted he remove it. Leland says, “Rob Bishop told me, ‘Don’t you dare take off your black hat,’ and I didn’t. This upset the Democrats so bad they called a recess, left the chamber and wouldn’t come back. To that, Rob said, ‘Well, now we can get something done!’”

After the 2018 Democrat victory in the House, Raul Grijalva took over as chairman of the Natural Resources Committee, and evidently wanted to beat the dead horse of Trump’s monument revisions. Leland appeared for a third time, unmoved, brusque, with facts at the ready and hat firmly in place. He opened with this:

“Typical of the spin associated with Washington, D.C., propaganda, you have been twirled around and around to the point that you couldn’t walk a straight line if you had to. Consideration and evaluation of the Trump monument boundary adjustments occurred under intense scrutiny for months prior to the president’s formal action. Those efforts included a published Presidential Order, a much-publicized and documented visit to the Clinton monument by the secretary of Interior, an extensive aerial review of many of the lands, input by tribal, federal, state and local officials, publicized comments by special-interest groups, newspaper articles, letters to the editor and a host of Internet chatter typical of decisions made in our current society. None of those actions were conducted for the 1996 Clinton designation. In fact, designation of the Clinton monument was a closely guarded secret known only to select self-interest groups and kept hidden behind the doors of the highest officials in Washington, D.C. Not even Utah’s congressman from the impacted district, and from President Clinton’s political party, was given notice of the Clinton-era designation until only a few minutes before the announcement actually took place.”

It’s unlikely that the Democrat Natural Resources leadership will be calling Leland Pollock back anytime soon.

The Environmentalist-Corporate Complex

Leland and his class of sagebrush rebels don’t really care for public attention and, in taking a stand, many have been harassed, bullied, and worn down to a nub. They would rather ranch, run local government, and enjoy their families than fight, but fight they do because it’s the right thing. Leland speaks introspectively about his role: “We have to fight because



Just days after President Trump used executive proclamations to revise two massive Utah monuments, Leland testified, along with former Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt (left) and others, before the House Committee on Natural Resources.

we care about the land. It’s the environmentalists who are committing a crime against the land by not allowing it to be made better with good management: improving forage, bringing in water, getting rid of fuel load, making sure your allotment isn’t a weed patch.”

Punching up against multimillion-dollar extremist groups is part and parcel of the job for many of Utah’s rural leaders. Following Trump’s 2017 monument revisions, a bloc of radical environmentalists and giant outdoor recreation companies threw a collective fit and sued the Trump administration along with tiny Garfield County. The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) claimed that commissioners broke the law by working with then-Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to deliberately restructure the GSE.

“When Trump made changes to the monument,” Leland says, “SUWA’s heads exploded, so here they come to sue little old Garfield County. They blamed us for shrinking the monument despite the fact that we have no legal authority to change anything about a national monument. In its lawsuit, SUWA accused us of working behind closed doors with Zinke to get our way. Well, SUWA didn’t understand that the law says county commissioners, especially in small rural counties, are not just administrators, but have a working role as well. As a small county we have no Equal Access to Justice Act money so we were not about to settle. We got a good attorney, and although SUWA wanted the trial in Salt Lake City, we had the venue changed to the Garfield County Courthouse and met them in court and we beat them.” As Leland would say, “the eco-terrorists” lost the case as well as their bid to have Garfield County foot the bill. In fact, SUWA was fined \$50,000 by the court for its frivolous legal temper tantrum.

Ranching Is Generational

Along with his wife and lifetime sweetheart, Michele, Leland runs a sizable ranch in Garfield County owned by his father-in-law, Claude Hatch. Like Leland, Claude has pioneer roots that go back to the first white settlements in the area. His herd of 80 cows, mostly black baldies, summer on Claude’s land and winter on 22,000 acres of BLM land in Arizona held by Leland and Michele. The Pollock name in southern Utah goes back to the 1870s. “Ranching is generational,” Leland says. “Pollocks settled the area of Bryce Valley and Tropic, along with other pioneers who

accepted the call from Brigham Young to populate these areas. I know SUWA and the Grand Canyon Trust hate me and the Pollock name, but we’ve been here since 1870 and those guys are newcomers from out of state.” Leland’s grandson, Kaison, the “golden pup,” is a fifth-generation Hatch/Pollock rancher.

Good science is critical to the future of the family’s way of life. Claude’s ranch abuts a

Eco-terrorism and Wildfires

On Aug. 25, 2018, Leland joined Chad Booth of The County Seat to talk about (dismally inadequate) PILT and SRS funding that is paid to counties in place of revenues they would otherwise collect from federally controlled lands. Chad asked Leland about what killed the once-profitable timber industry, and he got this scorching reply:

“Let’s get to the John Wayne honest version. I’m in the largest forest county in the state of Utah. Our forests are burning. They are a catastrophic mess. We lost our drinking water in Panguitch two years straight because the Forest Service wouldn’t thin the forests because they were afraid of the environmentalists. They’re really not environmentalists, they’re eco-terrorists. Look at the catastrophic fires in the West, where did they come from? They didn’t come from global warming, they came from a movement to eliminate sawmills. The problem was, a lot of those sawmills and the Forest Service were working good together. They were thinning, they were not clearcutting, and our forests back then were beautiful. That is the whole active management model that we have got to get back to.”



Coinciding with the 2016 Utah Hunting and Conservation Expo, Leland Pollock and several other southern Utah commissioners gained an audience with Donald Trump Jr.

major sage grouse recovery area. “The sage grouse recovery project has increased the forage 30 times per acre. What used to be clogged with pinyon and juniper has been cleared so sage grouse can flourish. The sage grouse are recovering, yet SUWA is protesting the effort. I believe they’re suing because they don’t want the land to improve because ultimately that’s good for cattle.”

With the help of Utah’s Watershed Restoration Initiative, a solar-powered well system was installed on the Red Canyon end of Claude’s ranch and has brought about a large increase in antelope herds in the area. “The wildlife benefit from these water projects,” Leland explains, “so the sportsmen need to be on our side. If the environmental activists are successful at getting rid of the ranchers, they will then go after hunting, then guns on public lands, then nothing will be allowed.”

An Unending Battle

Leland is most alarmed by what some might call “cultural transformation,” caused by political and economic pressures snuffing out the livelihoods of families who’ve been in Garfield County for generations. Such transformation is not hyperbole, it’s a real threat. “We had an insider working for us in the Forest Service who found out its new handbook stated ‘the Forest Service should encourage cultural transformation.’ There’s no doubt in



Leland, right, and fellow commissioners Jerry Taylor (left) and Dave Tebbs (second from left) established a working relationship with Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, which helped facilitate Utah’s crucial monument revisions.

my mind that cultural transformation means getting rid of the cattle and people like me. But we fought back and exposed that language. Garfield County put ordinances in place saying our culture, customs, and heritage should be considered in any studies or NEPA [National Environmental Policy Act] projects going forward. By exposing their own words, we got enough of an embarrassment factor that the Forest Service backed off the idea.”

Government rules and policies hang like the sword of Damocles over the future of western ranching. One election can help right

only thing that’s going to save the West. The same groups that are getting billions to *save* the planet are now *destroying* the planet. Mother Nature can’t just reverse what man has been doing for a hundred years in managing the land.”

Smack in the crosshairs of corporate environmentalists and acrimonious politicians, Leland and others defending the soul of rural Utah will likely spend the rest of their lives in the fray. “Fighting these guys is just a fact of life if you own a western ranch,” he says. “Your ranch is contiguous with federal land and when they stop you from grazing on that federal land, that’s it. You have nothing left. The best advice I have for other sagebrush rebels is to keep fighting. Being a sagebrush rebel is not just about fighting the establishment. We’re trying to preserve our heritage, and we cooperate with the agencies when it makes sense for the land. Ranchers are the true conservationists.”

He concludes, “Be honest, do the best you can, teach the next generation, and don’t quit.” ■

Marjorie Haun is a native of southern Utah and has witnessed firsthand the crushing impact of left-wing environmentalist policy on the state’s small counties and communities. She manages Free Range Report and is a freelance journalist specializing in government run-amok.

The Posse

Turning the tide against radical interests in southern Utah, Leland’s posse of rural leaders showcased their alliance at the Cedar City Western Freedom Festival in September of 2015. Corruption in federal agencies, abusive landgrabs, and unceasing attacks from vicious political activists inspired these leaders to band together and fight on behalf of their constituents.



Leland Pollock, Dave Miller (Iron County), Jerry Taylor (Garfield County), Mark Whitney (Beaver County), Kimball and Kerry Gibson (Weber County), Darrin Bushman (Piute County), Alan Gardner (Washington County), Dirk Clayton (Kane County), Ken Ivory (Utah state representative), and Phil Lyman (San Juan County).