

'Sagebrush rebellion' quieted -- for now



Court rules that public lands belong to U.S., not state

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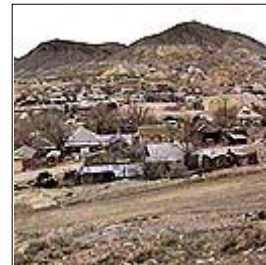
SAN FRANCISCO, California (CNN) -- The federal government is hoping a recent court decision will set a precedent for states challenging federal authority on public lands.

In its ruling, a U.S. district court told Nye County, Nevada, that public lands belonged to the federal government, not the state.

The county came to national attention as the seat of the so-called sagebrush rebellion, a series of efforts by local governments to wrest land control from the federal authorities.

Nye is an immense wedge covering more than 18,000 square miles -- about the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined -- with a population of some 20,000. But with the federal government owning 93 percent of the land, local hostility toward Washington runs high.

Nye County



Defiance on a tractor



In the eyes of county supervisor Dick Carver, the U.S. government is nothing short of a tyrant. He still vividly recalls his act of defiance in July 1994, when he climbed aboard his rusting Caterpillar bulldozer and rammed open a closed road in the Toiyabe national forest.

That moment of civil disobedience helped propel Carver to leadership of a rebellion that swept the West.

"It was the shot heard 'round the world," Carver said. "But it was the squeak in the groan of a bulldozer. It wasn't the bang of a gun."



One year after the rebellion began, the United States took the county to court.

The lawsuit sought to assert once and for all the government's ownership of federal lands in Nye County and, by legal inference, its possession of public lands that cover one-third of the nation's ground.

The [Justice Department](#)

estimates that at least 35 counties, primarily in Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and California, have declared authority over federal lands within their boundaries.

All those questioning federal authority watched closely as the case unfolded ... only to be disappointed.

Victory in defeat



Nye county's attorney, Roger Marzulla, claimed victory in the defeat. "The court has indicated, indeed, the federal government has recognized, that there is shared jurisdiction," he said.

The [U.S. Forest Service](#)'s Jack Ward Thomas says he is glad the county feels that way and hopes that cooperation will replace confrontation.

"We've been sharing that power for a very long time, and doing it willingly," he said.

[Sally Fairfax](#)

of the University of California at Berkeley has been studying the sagebrush rebellion. She says Nye County never had a chance of winning, but victory was never the object.

Fairfax says she thinks the county has succeeded in creating a ripple effect.

"Everybody's paying attention to the livestock interests again," she said. "The claim for local control over federal resources is echoing broadly over the land with a great deal of sympathetic support."

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