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Threats to U.S. Agents On Public Lands Cited

House Democrat Seeks Hearings on Violence

By Susan Schmidt
Washington Post Staff Writer

The senior Democrat on the House Resources Committee yesterday detailed a growing pattern of extremist violence against federal employees assigned to protect public lands and called for immediate hearings to assess risks to employees and the public.

Rep. George Miller (Calif.) said federal agents who work in remote parts of the country overseeing federal lands, parks and wildlife are facing threats and intimidation that are hampering their ability to do their jobs.

He also denounced five of his Republican colleagues, including Speaker Newt Gingrich (Ga.), for giving credence to the fears of some heavily armed people in western states who look on federal land managers and National Park Service officials as storm troopers.

Miller criticized Gingrich's recent comment that some people have a "genuine fear" of the government, and a statement by Sen. Larry E. Craig (R-Idaho) that there is now "a healthy fear" of federal agents.

"Their words can legitimize and incite, and there are already more than enough dangers facing rangers and other enforcement officials," Miller told reporters.

"To have members of the Senate, the House of Representatives, the speaker legitimize this as somehow reasonable and healthy is simply to provide the political space to continue the attacks and assaults against these federal officials who are working very hard to carry out the laws of this nation," Miller said.

Miller cited an October 1994 bombing at the Reno, Nev., office of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and a March 1995 bombing at the U.S. Forest Service office in Carson City, Nev., where 30 people were working. That same day, a bomb blew up an outhouse at Humboldt National Forest in Nevada. Offices in Montana have had several recent threats, he said.

Miller said a Fish and Wildlife Service employee in New Mexico was told he would have his head blown off, and the manager of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon was threatened with death and his family harassed.

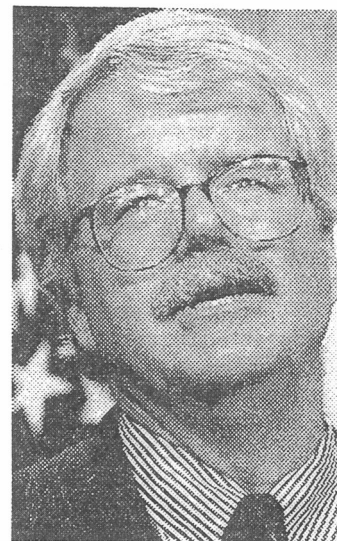


"There is across the West a genuine sense of fear of the federal government."

—SPEAKER NEWT GINGRICH (R), LEFT

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—REP. GEORGE MILLER (D), RIGHT



The fallout from such threats is well-documented, Miller said. The Forest Service has stopped doing road maintenance in part of Nevada's Toiyabe National Forest because of concerns that the lives of crew members were in danger. The Forest Service recently issued guidelines urging its employees to travel in pairs and maintain radio contact, and it suggested employees might want to dispense with uniforms and Forest Service vehicles if they would feel safer.

"Given heightened concern in the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing about verbal and physical attacks on public officials, this record of vigilantism deserves the full scrutiny of the committee on resources," Miller wrote in a letter to committee Chairman Don Young (R-Alaska). Young had no response yesterday.

Gingrich said in a television interview Sunday: "The thing that Easterners ought to understand . . . is that there is across the West a genuine sense of fear of the federal government. This is not an extremist position in much of the West."

Gingrich spokesman Tony Blankley said Miller is politicizing the issue and "playing to the bleachers."

"There is in fact a lot of anxiety out there," Blankley said. "What the basis for it is is subject to assessment."

Gingrich believes it is "appropriate for the federal government to enforce federal law," said Blankley, noting that he came out against a bill being prepared by freshman Rep. Helen Chenoweth (R-Idaho) that would have required federal agents to get permission from local sheriffs before they make an arrest or do a search on public lands.

"Senator Craig is not inciting violence," said spokesman Bryan Wilkes.

Craig wants park, wildlife and land management officials to leave police activities up to local law enforcement officials who are more familiar to the local population, he said. Many rural Westerners are intimidated at the sight of armed park and Forest Service officials, Wilkes said.

In addition to statements from Craig and Chenoweth, Miller criticized similar remarks made recently by Rep. Barbara F. Vucanovich (R-Nev.) and Craig Thomas (R-Wyo.).

Vucanovich said federal agents in Nevada should "exhibit sensitivity" to avoid being confronted at gunpoint. Thomas said he "understood the frustration of the people in the West. . . . I don't disagree with their arguments."