

# Ray Neiwert

Being the edited transcript of an interview by Mike Hudak

Issued as an extracanonial book of  
*Western Turf Wars: The Politics of Public Lands Ranching*

*Upon earning his bachelor's degree in range management at the University of Nevada at Reno, Ray Neiwert joined the US Forest Service as a range conservationist on the Toiyabe National Forest in central Nevada. Subsequently, he held positions on the Bearlodge District of the Black Hills National Forest (Wyoming), the Ochoco National Forest (Oregon), and the Sawtooth National Forest (Idaho). Neiwert retired from the Forest Service in 1997 after twenty-seven years of service.*

*Ray Neiwert made his remarks on the 17th of August 2003 in Boise, Idaho.*

## Chapters

1. Frustrations of working for the Forest Service
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## CHAPTER 1

### *Frustrations of working for the Forest Service*

It was an interesting career. Very frustrating mostly because of the politics. The Forest Service charter itself is very commendable, but it's never accomplished. I base that on my experience.

My first appointment, going back to Austin<sup>1</sup>—there were two people on the district, myself and the ranger, who were field-going personnel, and we had a million acres scattered a hundred miles in either direction on four different mountain ranges. So, you can gather that's an impossible task. If you think someone's looking after your public land—

From there it just descended into worse situations every year, because the budget was always crunched. There were fewer personnel to do the fieldwork. Congress passed new laws, it seemed like every year, that we were supposed to comply with, but there weren't field people to verify

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1. Ray Neiwert's career with the US Forest Service began on the Toiyabe National Forest in Austin, Nevada, in 1970.

anything that was happening on the ground. We could always sit in the office and write fine management plans. But when we wrote the management plan in the first place we didn't have baseline data that was updated.<sup>2</sup>

So it was just like that for my whole career. The year-and-a-half I spent on the Ochoco,<sup>3</sup> I was totally doing budget. We did it one way. And they changed their mind. And we did it a second way. And they changed their mind. And we did a third way. And it still doesn't give the Forest Service the bottom line of functional monetary effectiveness. It's all blown up into paperwork, rather than on-the-ground work.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Experience with a cattle trespass*

My first trespass case<sup>4</sup> back in 1971 was settled by the state senator, the district ranger, and the forest supervisor taking a trail ride for a couple of nights. And without any consultation with me made the decision that there would be no penalties. And the ranger was given a fine silver belt buckle from the state senator that he thought was probably worth about a \$100.

You kind of get weaned at an early stage of trying to attack the grazing vagrancies that occur. In my career they occurred constantly. I couldn't go to the field without finding something that needed action. And I'm sure that's the way it is with every range con that deals in the West.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Counting cows angers ranchers (fall 1989)*

It was simply that Don Oman<sup>5</sup> required the permittees—the ranchers—to comply with the terms and conditions of their grazing permits. And so, they just immediately went political and got help from Senator Larry Craig.<sup>6</sup> The Forest Service itself turned against Don—the people in the regional forester's office are actually the ones that promoted the attempt to move him out almost immediately.

What really started the boomtown activity is that we did a surprise cow count at the ranchers' gathering place way down on the South Hills.<sup>7</sup> We just showed up there, 4 o'clock in the morning, and said, "We'd like to count your cows." And we had a couple of state brand inspectors to sort out the brands and what not. I was working for Don Oman as one of his range conservationists, and actually I stayed back in an airplane with a pilot. And we went out and flew the area to try to count cows that had not been gathered.

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2. See similar remarks by Renee Galeano-Popp, pages 52–54, 61–63 of the hardcopy edition of *Western Turf Wars*.

3. Ray Neiwert refers to the Ochoco National Forest in central Oregon.

4. This incident occurred on the Toiyabe National Forest, Nevada.

5. Don Oman was the district ranger.

6. Larry Craig, US senator from Idaho (1991–2009).

7. The cow count organized by District Ranger Don Oman took place in the fall of 1989. Read Oman's fuller account of the incident on pages 117–119 of the hardcopy edition of *Western Turf Wars*.

Anyway, that was blown into a story by the ranchers that we had shown up with a paddy wagon, and we had a gunshot in the air.

We had a law enforcement officer there who did have his sidearm on. So that was the “armed guard”—it was just blown up into that kind of a story.

The regional office didn’t ask us if that was true or not. They didn’t ask any of us what had actually happened. They just bought the story as it had been passed on by the ranchers.

We’d actually sat on the fence. I drove out to the site after I had made the flight. And I sat on the fence with the kids and the women and visited and everything seemed cool.

And then later they were just terrified because our law enforcement officer had a sidearm on, even through in the back of their pickups hangs their carbines visible.

That was pretty disappointing on behalf of all of us on the district that the regional office was so distant.

So, we go through all these millions of dollars preparing what Congress has directed the land management resource plans at millions of dollars of cost. And they’re supposed to be updated every ten years, but if you actually try to put in place what we say in those plans, you become the “deer in the headlights.” And that’s a direct quote from the people in the regional office.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Supervisor of Sawtooth National Forest is pressured by politicians (1997)*

When the new supervisor came in, Bill Lavere,<sup>8</sup> he accepted the challenge of correcting resource damage by grazing. He wrote what’s called a uniform action guide for grazing, which just spreads out on the forest. It’s supposed to take the same action for the same violations.

Well, each permittee, when they sign their grazing permit, agrees to these same things. And because of the budget, which had come in for the future year, it indicated that there wasn’t money for range conservationists, or “range specialists,” as they changed the name to.

So, he wrote this uniform action guide and a letter to the permittees saying it’s up to you. You have to follow the guidelines. And if you don’t then I’ll have to impose these penalties.

It was as simple as that. And from that simple action on his part, he was at a “command performance”<sup>9</sup> drafted back into Washington, DC, by Helen Chenoweth,<sup>10</sup> the then congressman from Idaho. I don’t really know what they said or did to him, but he was very bitter, and we had no more range program that took action against the grazing permittees.<sup>11</sup>

8. Bill Lavere became supervisor of the Sawtooth National Forest in August 1995. E-mail from Don Oman to author, 22 August 2006.

9. Ray Neiwert states that this incident occurred in 1997.

10. Helen Chenoweth (1938–2006) (Republican) represented the first congressional district of Idaho in the US House of Representatives from 4 January 1995 to 3 January 2001.

11. Don Oman states that it is his understanding that at this meeting Lavere was persuaded that the issues he raised should be postponed until addressed in the forest plan. Then, when the forest plan was issued, it stated that these issues should be addressed allotment by allotment when permits were up for renewal. Consequently, Lavere’s proposal was never implemented. Phone conversation with Don Oman, 7 August 2006.