

Oregon takes fight to eco-terrorists

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PORTLAND, Ore. - In the battle against eco-terrorism, Oregon has become ground zero.

From a press office in Portland, the Earth Liberation Front, considered a leading domestic terrorist group by the FBI, announces acts of arson and vandalism. Nearby are the offices of Oregon's legislators, who have taken the novel approach of using racketeering laws to confront eco-terrorists.

"We have what I would describe as a new criminal element," said state Representative Lane Shetterly, an author of the new law. "This is a new and burgeoning area of criminal activity, and law enforcement is just now beginning to catch up."

The tougher attitude follows a string of attacks this year. Incidents linked to ELF have occurred as far away as Arizona, Kentucky, Minnesota, Michigan, and Long Island, N.Y., but the greatest concentration has been in Oregon.

In Oregon, the group this year has burned buildings, trucks, and machinery at a poplar farm that was once a genetic-research site. ELF has inflicted \$400,000 in damage at a lumber company. In March, the group announced, but did not take responsibility for, the torching of sport utility vehicles worth a total of \$1 million at a Eugene car dealership, where a similar fire last year burned pickups.

The same month, a Tennessee-based group attacked 800 poplar trees at Oregon State University research sites, wrongly asserting that they were genetically engineered.

This summer, the group claimed victory in the fight against the Eagle Creek timber sale in the Mount Hood National Forest east of Portland. It torched three logging trucks owned by a subcontractor, and The Oregonian reported that sawmills canceled orders because of the violence.

"It's proof that the tactic the ELF employs, that of economic sabotage, does work," said Craig Rosenbraugh, spokesman for the North American ELF press office.

The attacks, however, also increased attention on the response of federal and state officials.

Federal terrorism and arson statutes cover many eco-terrorist crimes, said Assistant US Attorney Steven Peifer in Portland. On the state level, Doug Farquhar, program director for environmental health at the Denver-based National Conference of State Legislatures, said he has seen a trend "explode" this year: the raising of domestic terrorism penalties from "criminal mischief" misdemeanors to felonies carrying years of incarceration.

"And when they do catch somebody, they make a huge example of them," he said. Last month, a Eugene judge sentenced an anarchist convicted in the dealership fire and an attempted arson to

22 years in prison.

But Rosenbraugh said "stiffer penalties are only going to make the individuals in the ELF more determined to increase their work and continue their work." Only five members have ever been caught, he said.

The Oregon Legislature took a different tack. Rather than increasing penalties for individual crimes, a new law treats eco-terrorism as organized crime. Signed into law in May, the measure expands the crimes under the state's racketeering law to include those against the logging industry, agriculture, and animal research.

The federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, created to fight the Mafia, covers crimes committed in a pattern that demonstrates that an organization is behind them.

"What we have seen over the past five or six years is that these acts of eco-sabotage are not being committed by individuals who happen to have a passion for a cause," said Shetterly, who began his work on the Oregon law more than 18 months ago. "These groups are highly organized."

Oregon's law assumes that people commit such crimes repeatedly. "If you can't get somebody on arson, but you can show that they've been engaged in two or three tree-spiking incidents, you may get the same groups and individuals that are involved in the arsons as well," Shetterly said.

Oregon is a special target for environmentalists because its economy depends on natural resources, said Philip Donegan Jr., FBI assistant special agent in charge.

The Earth Liberation Front, an offshoot of the United Kingdom-based EarthFirst!, surfaced in the United States in 1996 when members vandalized locks at a McDonald's in Eugene. The group's new video, "Igniting the Revolution," urges viewers to "fight the threat to the natural environment caused by the desire for monetary gain."

By destroying property only, the group's self-described "elves" regard their work as "nonviolent, direct actions." Rosenbraugh said the FBI better exemplifies a domestic terrorist organization.

In the last five years, the front has matured, said the US Forest Service's James Damitio, assistant special agent in charge for investigations in the Northwest. ELF members are "dedicated terrorists," he said. "They have a cause. They have increasing expertise. They have increasingly better funding. They are increasing in numbers and boldness and organization."

Reluctant to discuss specific techniques, the Forest Service, FBI, and state and local officials are dedicating more resources to these crimes and collaborating nationwide.

Their problem is that ELF is practically invisible. Leaderless cells are scattered internationally and conduct their business on the Internet.

"Each cell is anonymous not only to the general public and myself, but to one another," said Rosenbraugh. "So if the FBI were to go in and infiltrate one cell or capture one cell in its entirety, that doesn't mean that other cells will be captured and the movement is going to be stopped."

US Representative Darlene Hooley represents Monmouth, Ore., where volunteer firefighters

nearly died on Christmas 1999 when the roof collapsed at a Boise Cascade Corp. facility. Boise Cascade, allegedly targeted by the front, was a big employer, and citizens rallied to keep the company from leaving. "These are not victimless crimes," Hooley said.

Hooley on Friday introduced the Environmental Terrorism Reduction Act, which would establish a clearinghouse of international eco-terrorist acts and assist local authorities in getting federal help.

Despite the few arrests, with increased resources and broader awareness, investigators like Damitio are confident.

"Once you focus the attention of federal and state law enforcement in a coordinated, well-organized fashion against a target," Damitio said, "it's very rare that we don't, with time, win. We will."