

## The U.S. Goes on Green Alert When is a vandal a terrorist? When he's also an environmentalist.

by Karen Charman  
from [One Earth](#) magazine

---

On June 16, 2000, 22-year-old Jeff Luers torched three shiny new pickup trucks at a Chevrolet dealership in Eugene, Oregon. He was protesting Americans' excessive consumption of oil. For this and a botched attempt to burn an empty gasoline truck, Luers, a first-time offender, was sentenced to 23 years, although nobody was injured in the incidents.

Luers had the misfortune of going to trial not long after Oregon passed the nation's toughest statutes against ecoterrorism. According to the new laws, a person who "interferes" with logging operations could receive up to 20 years in jail and a \$300,000 fine. Someone who uproots genetically modified crops from research plots could receive five years in prison and a \$100,000 fine. By comparison, an Oregon Forest Service worker who in 1998 set 30 forest fires to earn overtime fighting the blazes received a three-year jail sentence -- although her actions endangered the lives of more than 120 firefighters.

Over the past three years more than 20 states, including California and Florida, have passed laws that increase penalties for those engaged in ecoterrorism, a legislative trend that troubles Michael Ratner, president of the New York City-based Center for Constitutional Rights. Laws against vandalism, arson, and trespassing already exist, Ratner says, so additional ones aren't necessary. "Calling people terrorists who protest GM crops by ripping them out or damaging a lab puts them on the same level as the World Trade Center attackers," he says. "That's ridiculous." No, it's not, says Rep. George Nethercutt Jr.

(R-Wash). At a congressional hearing on ecoterrorism, Nethercutt called the environmental group Earth Liberation Front (ELF) a "homegrown brand of Al Qaeda," and he has cosponsored a federal ecoterrorism bill (which never reached the floor for a vote). "National environmental groups need to know," he proclaimed, "you are either with us or against us."

That ELF has committed criminal acts isn't in question. Since 1996 it has destroyed more than \$43 million worth of property, including a condominium development in Vail, Colorado. But are its members terrorists? The FBI thinks so: It counts the group among the nation's top terrorist organizations.

But Bron Taylor, a University of Florida professor who has studied radical environmental groups for two decades, says that these acts don't meet "a common-sense definition of terrorism," which typically involves attempts to kill or maim people, not destroy property, to bring about change. It may be that lawmakers, says Ratner, are simply "using terrorism as a broad brush to discredit a movement."