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the appearance of not protecting free speech,” she said. “Our hands are really tied.”

Cramer believes the “bigger problem” of the camp is “the illegal activity that may be orchestrated from there” — meaning a base to launch interference with pipeline construction miles away. About 95 people have been arrested in several pipeline protests — some as far as 70 miles away from the camp — since early August, but none at the camp itself. Protesters deny state officials’ charge, with Hall saying the camp promotes “peaceful” protest.

“People don’t leave from the camp with malicious intent to do harm,” Hall said. “There are always going to be a few bad eggs in any group you can’t get the message to.”

Ranchers and farmers in the area are wary of the growing number of protesters and are fearful of damage to their fields and pastures, Morton County Sheriff Kyle Kirchmeier said.

“We’ve had several reports of people down there getting stopped on the road and being intimidated to hay that has been stolen to grazing animals without permission,” he said.

Matthew Rebenitsch, who has a ranch just a few miles from the encampment, said he and his neighbors worry about talking publicly about the situation.

“To be honest, no one around here wants to say anything because we’re afraid they will come and threaten us,” he said. “I’ll say this, every rancher around here is packing and people are locking their doors — and no one has ever locked a door in their entire life.”

Republican state Rep. James Schmidt, who also farms and ranches nearby, said he and his neighbors are more cautious.

“I’m starting to see a lot more guns in the back of pickup trucks. All it is going to take is one incident and emotions are going to overtake the situation,” he said.

Complicating the issue is a grazing lease on that land. The renter, David Meyer, is responsible for the condition of the land. He could enforce his lease and have people removed, Williamson said, but hasn’t requested any intervention. Meyer recently sold part of his historic Cannonball Ranch to Energy Transfer Partners for an undisclosed price; he hasn’t returned telephone calls from The Associated Press seeking comment.

The Standing Rock Sioux has chal-

lenged the Army Corps of Engineers’ decision to grant permits for the pipeline that is intended to carry North Dakota oil to Illinois. Due to a federal court decision, construction has stopped within 20 miles on either side of Lake Oahe, a Missouri River reservoir that is near the encampment. The Departments of Justice, Army and Interior also has said it will “reconsider any of its previous decisions” on land that borders or is under the lake.

Hall, a member of South Dakota’s Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, said the Sioux “never ceded” the land on which they’re camping. He said they are preparing to stay through the winter by stockpiling firewood, heating stoves and warmer clothes. But there’ll be no permanent structures built, Hall said.

“We will leave this camp as we found it,” he said.

## ■ COLUMN ■

# Ag Commissioner sounds off on Dakota Pipeline protesters, calls some “thugs”

While the courts, the protesters and the Obama administration figure out the future of the Dakota Pipeline construc-



**JASON SPIESS**  
For Bakken Breakout  
Weekly

tion, the state of North Dakota continues to work as harvest season has arrived. According to North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner Doug Goehring, there have been some problems with pipeline protesters and harvest season activities.

“We have activists, and I would even go as far as to call them thugs, that are blocking roads, either with vehicles or they are standing in the middle of the road,” Goehring said. “And they are intimidating people, threatening people, cutting wires, cutting fences and stealing hay.”

Goehring said he has received reports that the protesters will go in some areas along that Dakota Pipeline and cut the wires, pull in, unload their horses, park vehicles and protest illegally in some places.

“They are threatening the safety and

well being of our citizens out there,” Goehring said. “We have law enforcement that has to escort the school bus. We have husbands who have to drive their wives to work, in some cases 20-to-30-some miles, and then get back home.”

He added there have been incidents where vehicles have been forced off the road by other vehicles that are from out of state or do not have license plates.

“You cannot even identify them,” Goehring said. “We have people in masks that are just getting up in farmer’s faces and telling them they are wrong. And they are telling the farmers they should get off the land because it was once theirs and by God it’s going to be theirs again.”

Goehring believes the protest has gone too far and some people are feeling threatened and unsafe.

“And we’ve had some situations that really have threatened the safety and welfare of people living and working out there,” Goehring said. “We have people who have sent their kids to town several weeks ago for them to go to school or work simply because they do not want them driving back and forth. They can’t trust the situation. This just isn’t right.”

He added there have been mixed media messages over the past couple of months too.

“Some talk about this being a peaceful protest, well how irresponsible for some in the media. It’s anything but peaceful,”

Goehring said.

One of Goehring’s biggest concerns is rural America and their agrarian attributes and values.

“There’s just too many things going on and these people who live in these rural communities, these rural citizens, these farmers and ranchers have done nothing to anybody else,” Goehring said. “They have just tried to work and live in a community they built.”

Goehring said he met with the Morton County Sheriff’s office to confirm some of the activities that were reported to him.

“And know you have people who have infiltrated it and are compromising that safety. And threatening that safety and threatening those farmers,” Goehring said. “And just a complete lack of respect for their property and everyone’s personal safety.”

In the meantime, the local farmers and ranchers have to keep doing their chores; Mother Nature doesn’t take any breaks.

“We have situations out there where farmers and ranchers need to get to their fields,” Goehring said. “They need to haul hay, they need to move cattle, they need to chop silage. They also need to harvest corn and sunflowers.”

Goehring added that many of the farmers are already under stress, and have enough anxiety with the current

economic conditions in agriculture.

“This is going to put them in a position where there is more stress and more anxiety,” Goehring said.

When asked about whether the protest will involve drones or UAS devices in the near future, Goehring said those conversations have been had and some are currently looking into the FAA rules and regulations in case unmanned deployment and surveillance is needed.

“That was one of the reasons I met with the sheriff’s department was to see if there was any opportunity for those farmers and ranchers to call the sheriff’s department and ask for some assistance,” Goehring said. “And it may be possible to put some drones out there to identify activity in the area.”

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