

THE EARTH LIBERATION FRONT AND ENVIRONMENTAL TERRORISM

Stefan H. Leader*
Peter Probst

Introduction

In the wake of September 11, 2001, Americans can be forgiven for thinking that terrorist threats come from abroad and have a distinctly Islamic character. In fact, homegrown terrorists of all kinds continue to flourish in the US. Case in point: The Earth Liberation Front (ELF). ELF has become the most active and the most destructive environmental terrorist group in the United States. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Earth Liberation Front, together with its sister organization, the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), in the past 6 years has committed more than 600 criminal acts that have resulted in more than \$43 million in damages.¹ Moreover, attacks have been perpetrated in virtually every region of the US against a wide variety of targets.

Origins

The Earth Liberation Front was established in 1992 in Brighton, England and dedicated to saving the environment. It was founded by the more radical members of the activist environmental group, "Earth First!" who believed criminal acts would better advance their environmentalist agenda than would legal protest. The American branch announced its creation in October 1996 with an arson attack on a US Forest Service truck in Oregon's Willamette National Forest. The decoupling of ELF from Earth First enabled the two organizations to focus on their respective constituencies. Earth First recruits those who believe in peaceful, non-violent protest. The ELF, in contrast, draws those who favor direct action and revolutionary violence. The goals of the two groups are similar. They differ primarily in the means to be employed.

The Animal Liberation Front (ALF) was formed in Great Britain in the 1970s as an outgrowth of groups such as Greenpeace and the Sea Shepherds Conservation Society. It predates ELF and is predominantly concerned with animal rights issues. Over the years, ALF has become increasingly radical and violent. Traditionally, the agendas of the two groups have overlapped and, in an open 1993 communiqué, ELF declared solidarity with the ALF.² Since then, increasingly, there has been a convergence of leadership, membership, agendas and funding.

*** Author biographies at end of paper.**

Organization, Ideology and Goals

Leaderless Resistance: ELF's web site describes the organization as an "international underground *movement* consisting of autonomous groups of people who carry out direct action according to the E.L.F. guidelines."³ [Emphasis added.] In fact, ELF, like some other terrorist groups, adheres to the principal of "leaderless resistance."

Developed by Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and Aryan Nations activist Louis Beam, leaderless resistance is a technique by which terrorist groups can carry out violent acts while reducing the risk of infiltration by law enforcement elements. The basic principle of leaderless resistance is that there is no centralized authority or chain-of-command. The various cells are linked by shared ideology but otherwise are autonomous, for the most part unconnected and unknown to each other.⁴ The ELF web site, which plays a vital role in the organization's communications with its members, advises prospective members not to try to join existing cells, as such efforts would be fruitless and could threaten the organization, but, rather, to form their own cell and proclaim membership in ELF by attacking the property of those who seek to despoil the environment. Moreover, the web site says this about the organization's operating philosophy:

*"By operating in cells (small groups that consist of one to several people), the security of group members is maintained. Each cell is anonymous not only to the public but also to one another. This decentralized structure helps keep activists out of jail and free to continue conducting actions."*⁵

This lack of formal organization makes it extremely difficult for law enforcement to penetrate the ELF, as, in reality, it is more of an amorphous movement than an organization in any conventional sense of the word. According to Bob Holland, A Eugene, Oregon police detective who has been investigating eco-terrorism for several years, members "know each other and don't tolerate strangers."⁶ The lack of organization also seems to fit the anti-authoritarian orientation of many ELF activists.

This operating model, with its lack of formal organizational structure, is increasingly seen across the terrorism spectrum, whether the organization is the violent anti-abortion group, the Army of God, or the Christian Identity group known as the Phineas Priesthood. Even the Islamist, *Al Qaeda*, has demonstrated the ability to operate as a decentralized, leaderless movement as well as in a centralized, hierarchical mode. The use of loose networks of groups that share similar goals has made the work of law enforcement agencies and the intelligence services much more difficult. Without any formal chain of command, such groups are difficult to penetrate as the operational elements may draw from disparate organizations for a single operation, disbanding once the task has been completed.

Ideology: Two fundamental concepts motivate environmental terrorists: biocentrism and

deep ecology. Biocentrism is the belief that all organisms on earth are equal and deserving of moral rights and considerations. They see biodiversity and wilderness as absolute goods. Believers in deep ecology favor a rollback of industrialization/civilization and return to a way of life seen as more consistent with preservation of the environment. In this regard, their views resemble those of “Unabomber,” Theodore Kaczynski. (Kaczynski’s lengthy manifesto began with the assertion that the industrial revolution has been a disaster for the human race.) Deep ecologists favor restoration to its imagined pristine state, of an environment they believe has been despoiled by the selfish actions of the human race. In practice, this would mean return to pre-industrial, subsistence agricultural communities. “Knock down all the concrete,” is the way one ELF sympathizer puts it.⁷ Indeed, February 2002 testimony by former ELF spokesman Craig Rosebraugh makes clear that ELF sees itself linked to the anti-globalization movement that contains anarchist and anti-capitalist elements.

Organizations that rely on leaderless resistance depend on the commitment of their members to a common ideology and set of goals and ELF is no different. The ELF web site contains the following goals and guidelines:

- To inflict economic damage on those profiting from the destruction and exploitation of the natural environment.
- To reveal and educate the public on the atrocities committed against the earth and all species that populate it.
- To take all necessary precautions against harming any animal, human and nonhuman.

Underlying the first guideline is a fundamental hostility to the US capitalist economic system and a belief that the system is a fundamental threat to global environment. ELF leaders, at the very least, appear to believe that the capitalist system must be destroyed.⁸ In interviews and public statements, spokesman Craig Rosebraugh has made his anti-capitalist agenda quite clear. In testimony before Congress in February 2002, Rosebraugh ended his statement with this exhortation:

“ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE. LONG LIVE THE EARTH LIBERATION FRONT. LONG LIVE THE ANIMAL LIBERATION FRONT. LONG LIVE ALL THE SPARKS ATTEMPTING TO IGNITE THE REVOLUTION. SOONER OR LATER THE SPARKS WILL TURN TO FLAME!”⁹

Publicity: Terrorism expert Brian Jenkins has said that terrorists want “a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead.” Although that generalization no longer applies to all terrorist groups, some of which have turned to mass casualty tactics like the 9/11 attacks on New York and the Pentagon, it certainly applies to ELF. Like many other terrorist groups, ELF views publicity as the oxygen of the movement and publicity is a key part of their agenda. The second guideline certainly makes clear the organization’s commitment

to public education. Increasingly, ELF appears to have been impressed by the success of the anti-globalization movement and its ability to generate media publicity. In response, ELF appears to have broadened its range of targets in order to broaden its appeal. For example, the organization has targeted large corporations such as Monsanto as well as university offices and laboratories engaged in genetic engineering of crops, or related research. Competition for headlines may well drive ELF to carry out more spectacular and inherently more dangerous operations.

Finally, the third guideline is aimed at avoiding injury to people. ELF claims its operations are directed against property and that it goes to great lengths to assure that people are not endangered. However, law enforcement officials believe that despite ELF's assurances, sooner or later civilian casualties will result either through miscalculation or, as we note below, from a deliberate escalation of tactics.

Tactics, Techniques

ELF's prime weapon is **arson**, which it views, as a legitimate act of political protest and correctly notes can be more destructive than explosives. An ELF activist told an interviewer recently "It takes *all the tools* in the toolbox to dismantle the master's machine."¹⁰ ELF spokesman Craig Rosebraugh put the tactic in perspective: "Nobody is going to understand fire and property damage – [ELF] is trying to cause economic damages."¹¹ The ELF web site contains a detailed instruction manual on creating incendiary devices of all kinds, using a wide variety of commonly available materials.

As can be seen in Table 1, about a third of the ELF attacks carried out between 1996 and 2001, and certainly its most destructive, were arson attacks. In addition, ELF relies on **sabotage and vandalism**, or what is known in the movement as "monkey wrenching," which includes such activities as spray painting slogans on buildings and vehicles, applying super glue to locks, breaking windows, destroying equipment and records, and other forms of property destruction.

| TABLE 1 ELF ATTACKS BY TACTIC, 1996-2001 (Based on data from ELF attack database below.) | |
|--|----|
| ARSON (Deliberately starting a fire or attempting to start a fire to cause property damage) | 32 |
| SABOTAGE (deliberate damage to equipment, vehicles, crops, buildings etc.) | 19 |
| VANDALISM (low level damage such as breaking windows, spray painting of slogans, etc.) | 36 |

| TABLE 1 | |
|---|---|
| ELF ATTACKS BY TACTIC, 1996-2001 | |
| (Based on data from ELF attack database below.) | |
| TREE SPIKING | 2 |
| CYBER | 2 |
| OTHER | 1 |
| TOTAL | 9 |

Extreme tactics: In July 2000, unknown animal and environmental extremists left three jars containing low concentrations of a cyanide compound at different locations in downtown Minneapolis as part of a protest against a conference on genetic engineering. The incident suggests that there may be elements in the movement who are prepared to go beyond arson and sabotage and beyond the strictures against injuring people. Given its loose structure, the organization has no way of preventing such acts even if it wanted to.

The belief, held by some ELF members, in the need to roll back industrial society and return the Earth to its [imagined] pristine pre-industrial state could encourage one or more of such people to turn to even more extreme measures in the hope of reducing the population growth and capitalist materialism that many ELF members see as a direct threat to the survival of the planet.

Operational Planning and Target Surveillance: According to the FBI, ELF operations often involve careful pre-operational video and photographic surveillance, intelligence collection, the studying industry and trade publications, as well as other open source material that enables the cell to better understand their targets and to identify their target's prime vulnerabilities. For the most part, ELF attacks have been directed at low security targets.

As the FBI noted recently, the ALF has infiltrated laboratories and other environmental oriented businesses by placing sympathetic individuals in low-level jobs and exploiting their insider access to collect information on the treatment of laboratory animals and to facilitate attacks designed to liberate animals. Given the close ties between ALF and ELF it is entirely possible that ELF could resort to similar tactics.

ELF members, refer to themselves as "Elves," and receive what are in essence tutorials in arson and sabotage that they download from the ELF web site. Their incendiary devices although not sophisticated are, nevertheless, effective and do significant damage.

Targets

ELF has carried out attacks against facilities and companies involved in logging, genetic engineering, home building, automobile sales, energy production and distribution, and a

wide variety of other activities, all charged by ELF with exploiting the environment.

ELF boasts on its web site that since 1997, the organization has caused damages in excess of \$40 million, and the ALF-ELF joint 2001 Year End Action Report claims at least 137 illegal acts were committed in North America. ELF's most spectacular operation was the October 1998 arson attack against a ski resort in Vail, Colorado, which resulted in some \$12-24 million in damages. ELF has also claimed responsibility for the \$1 million arson at the Boise Cascade lumber company in Monmouth, Oregon; the \$5.4 million attack against the University of Washington's Center for Urban Horticulture in Seattle; a \$1 million fire at a meat packing plant in Redmond, Oregon, and a \$1 million fire at a U.S. Department of Agriculture facility in Olympia, Washington. Table 2 shows the distribution of attacks by target type.

Funding

ELF receives its funding through a number of sympathetic and allied organizations, as well as from wealthy and other benefactors. In addition, ELF has received support from elements of the animal rights movement, to which it is closely linked. In January 1995, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) reportedly gave a \$45,200 contribution to the Rodney Coronado support committee. Coronado, an ELF activist, had been convicted of an arson attack against a research facility at Michigan State University. (The previous year PETA had given a \$25,000 loan to Coronado's father.) In August 1999, PETA gave a \$2,000 contribution to David Wilson, the then-public spokesman for ALF and, in April 2001, PETA made a \$1,500 contribution to the North American ELF to support their programs and activities.

TABLE 2
ELF ATTACKS BY
TARGET
1996-2001

*Based on database of ELF attacks.

| Target | Number |
|---------------------------|---------------|
| Logging & related | 18 |
| Government facilities | 5 |
| Corporations | 33 |
| Symbols of global economy | 3 |

| TABLE 2 ELF ATTACKS BY TARGET 1996-2001 <small>*Based on database of ELF attacks.</small> | |
|---|----|
| Urban sprawl/ development | 30 |
| Genetic engineering/ biotech research facilities | 14 |
| Facilities that threaten animals | 6 |

Potential Threats

Anti-Nuclear Actions: To date ELF has not attacked nuclear facilities although they have targeted energy facilities (see numbers 79 and 82 in the database). However there is some evidence that ELF may expand its target list to include nuclear sites. A self-proclaimed Seattle ELF sympathizer and animal rights radical testified before a Portland, Oregon grand jury that if the [Bush] Administration encourages expansion of the nuclear power industry, nuclear plants will be targeted. He further claimed that if the facilities were too well secured, plant executives or their homes would be attacked. Such actions would cross a threshold, as ELF has not targeted people. On the other hand, ALF has targeted officers of corporations deemed to be harming animals.

In addition, the radical environmental movement has a history of anti-nuclear actions. In 1989, for example, the Evan Mecham Eco Terrorist International Conspiracy (EMETIC) was charged with conspiring to attack nuclear power plants in three states. In May 1989, key members of the group were arrested and charged with planning to attack the Central Arizona Project and the Palo Verde nuclear generating station in Arizona; the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant in California; and the DOE Rocky Flats nuclear facility in Colorado. Several members of the group served jail sentences ranging from 30 days to six years.

The targeting of the nuclear industry is particularly worrisome because of the industry's perceived vulnerability and the publicity and political capital that would accrue to the radicals as a result of such an operation. The sensitivity of the American public to possible attacks on nuclear sites can be seen in the public and media reaction to documents found in Afghanistan that suggest Usama bin Laden and *al Qaeda* were actively considering attacks on nuclear sites. That same public sensitivity to things nuclear can be seen in the controversy over the Yucca Mountain (Nevada) nuclear waste storage facility and the general "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) attitude toward nuclear waste storage.

Clearly, ELF is media savvy and most certainly must be counted as part of the attentive public. There can be little doubt they follow media coverage on the alleged vulnerabilities of America's nuclear plants, such as the 2002 news stories reporting Representative Edward Markey's charges that terrorists could gain access to weapons grade nuclear material stored at US nuclear facilities and use these materials to construct and detonate a nuclear device on site. Media reporting on the controversy noted that during a security penetration drill at the Rocky Flats facility near Denver, Navy SEAL's were able to "steal" sufficient material to make several nuclear weapons. In a similar security drill at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, media reported that "terrorists" had gained access and control over nuclear material for sufficient time to construct an improvised nuclear device.¹²

These incidents, the articles noted, occurred despite the fact that officials at the facilities were notified well in advance of the tests and, yet, the guard force was unable to thwart many of the assaults." Markey in a letter to the US Department of Energy (DOE) cited numerous security problems with regard to the storage and transportation of weapons grade material. He cited for particular criticism four major facilities: Lawrence Livermore, Los Alamos, Rocky Flats and Oak Ridge. His criticism, largely based on a 2001 study by the Project on Government Oversight (POGO) and similar documents, was damaging. The POGO study noted that mock terrorists during a drill in October 2000 gained control of nuclear material that, if detonated, would have endangered significant parts of New Mexico and Colorado. It also noted that some of the facilities are close to population centers.

Environmental impact statements concerning sensitive facilities are in the public domain and when taken together with building plans and other public sources, provide would-be terrorists a wealth of targeting data and, at times, a virtual roadmap for those who would seek to compromise the nation's security. One of the more egregious examples is a study posted on the Internet by the State of Nevada's Waste Project Office that provides detailed information concerning the transportation of nuclear waste to the Yucca Mountain site, including data on the vulnerabilities of the casks used to transport such material and the types of anti-tank weapons best suited to breach the containers.

With the approval by Congress of the Yucca Mountain facility, there can be little doubt that radical environmentalists will engage in actions designed to impede or thwart deliveries of waste to that facility. Given the decentralized nature of the organization and the inability to control tactics used by activists, anti-nuclear activists could turn to violent actions that would threaten the health and safety of workers and communities along the transportation routes, despite ELF's stated commitment to not harm people.

Moreover, the rhetoric of ELF spokesman Craig Rosebraugh could encourage more violent tactics. In testimony submitted to the US House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health on February 12 2002, Rosebraugh took up the cause of the Zapatistas in Mexico and even defended the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. He accused the US of trying to overthrow or assassinate former President Nasser of Egypt and of killing 1.5 million Iraqis as a result of the Gulf War and the subsequent UN sanctions. He further implied US government complicity in the 9/11 attack against the World Trade Center and Pentagon, and attributed many of the inequities in the world to American Imperialism. His written statement (quoted below and on p. 4) provides a thinly disguised justification for violence as indicated by the following:

If the people of the United States, who the government is supposed to represent, are actually serious about creating a nation of peace, freedom, and justice, then there must be a serious effort made, by any means necessary, to abolish imperialism and U.S. governmental terrorism. The daily murder and destruction caused by this political organization is very real, and so the campaign by the people to stop it must be equally as potent.

His testimony closes with an exhortation (quoted above, p. 4) reminiscent of a militant Marxist-Leninist and suggests a readiness to escalate the violence ("... by any means necessary").

Anti GE/GMO Actions: In the past three years ELF increasingly has carried out what it calls anti-GE/GMO actions – anti-genetic engineering/genetically modified organism's actions. ELF has said that they believe there is a direct link between oppression of animals and destruction of the planet and the genetic alteration of life forms. They argue that the same attitude and arrogance that allow the torture, abuse and killing of animals,

the perpetuation of old growth logging and urban sprawl also are inherent in activities designed to change the genetic code of plants and animals.

It should be noted in this connection that ELF activists are not always terribly expert in their understanding of science and have attacked facilities with little or only marginal connection to genetic engineering. Moreover, arson can be a rather blunt instrument. At one US University their attack on a life sciences building destroyed a lab engaged in research on organic farming as well as labs involved in genetic engineering. Clearly, they pose a threat to other university, government and private labs seen as involved in research related to genetic engineering.

Insider Threat: Early in 2001, a Brookhaven National Laboratory intern was convicted in connection with one or more ELF arson attacks against newly constructed houses (seen as “urban sprawl”) on eastern Long Island. The young man did not possess a security clearance but had reportedly used a Brookhaven computer to access the ELF website and do research related to his criminal activities.¹³ As noted above, use of insiders with access to key areas of targeted facilities has long been a favorite tactic of ALF. ELF could well turn to the same technique.

Conclusions/ Summary Threat Assessment

Based on the analysis and data presented, it is clear that ELF poses a threat to research facilities involved in, or perceived to be involved in, virtually any form of biotech research. Given ELF’s preference for attacking facilities with little or no security, university labs are most clearly at risk.

ELF also poses an insider threat to research laboratories and other similar facilities. The Brookhaven case cited above suggests the possibility that ELF could place a sympathizer inside a research facility.

Finally, ELF could pose a threat to nuclear facilities; especially those involved in the storage of nuclear waste, by organizing violent demonstrations designed to disrupt waste shipments. Given the decentralized nature of the organization and its loose control over the tactics used by activists, the possibility that such individuals could turn to violent tactics not consistent with ELF’s general guidelines cannot be ignored.

Dr. Stefan Leader: Dr. Leader is a terrorism specialist and has written extensively on domestic US as well as international terrorism issues for US and UK publications. He is Program Manager with Integrated Data Systems, Chantilly, VA, and USA and manages an intelligence analysis group under contract to the US Defense Intelligence Agency’s Joint Intelligence Task Force- Combating Terrorism.

Peter Probst:

¹ Testimony of James Jarboe, FBI, before US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, February 12, 2002, p. 1.

² Chronology prepared by Center for Defense of Free Enterprise, www.cdfef.org/elf.htm.

³ <http://www.earthliberationfront.com/main.shtml>

⁴ Bruce Barcott, "From Tree-Hugger to Terrorist," *The New York Times* (web edition), April 7, 2002, p. 1.

⁵ <http://www.earthliberationfront.com/main.shtml>

⁶ quoted in Barcott, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁷ quoted in Barcott, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁸ Its hard to generalize about ELF leaders since with a few exceptions we don't know who they are.

Generalizations in this paper draw on the contents of their web site, a video released by the organization and statements and testimony by a few spokesmen, like Craig Rosebraugh.

⁹ Testimony before US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, February 12 2002; Eunice Moscoso, "Alleged Ecoterrorist Takes the Fifth Before Congress," Cox News Service, February 12, 2002.

¹⁰ Barcott, "From Tree-Hugger to Terrorist," *The New York Times* (web edition), April 7, 2002, p. 4.

¹¹ Tony Paul, "Group Claims Hall Fire," *The State News* (Michigan State University), January 24, 2000, p. 1.

¹² Eric Pianin and Bill Miller, "Nuclear Arms Plant Security Lax..." *Washington Post*, January 23, 2002, p. A15; Shawn Terry, "Markey Calls DOE Security 'Shaky': Agency Disputes Claim," *Inside Energy*, August 26, 2002, p. 10; Elaine Hiruo, Markey Says DOE Security Lacking," *Nucleonics Week*, August 22, 2002, p. 3.; "Security at Nuclear Power Facilities Goes to Forefront of Politicians' Concerns," Foster Electric Report, November 28, 2001, p. 9.

¹³ Christine Haughney, "Teenagers' Activism Takes a Violent Turn," *Washington Post*, March 27, 2001, p. A03.