

## Flaming SUVs: A conversation with Jeff Luers Gregory Dicum, Special to [SF Gate](#), June 22, 2005

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Five years ago this month, Jeff Luers set fire to three SUVs at a dealership in Eugene, Ore., to protest America's heedless contributions to global warming. He was promptly arrested and put on trial for arson.

Refusing to plea bargain, as his accomplice did, and with a past record that includes 30 days in jail for a scuffle with a U.S. Forest Service agent, the then 22-year-old Luers was sentenced to 22 years and 6 months in prison, the longest sentence ever handed down in America for environmentally motivated sabotage.

The FBI estimates that in 2002, about 100 acts of ecoterrorism, which the agency defines as "the use or threatened use of violence of a criminal nature against innocent victims or property ... for environmental-political reasons," are perpetrated each year. Though these acts have included spectacular actions such as the 1998 incineration of a ski lodge in Colorado and a number of more recent SUV torchings (including an incident at the same site Luers had targeted, which took place while he was on trial), [very few](#) perpetrators have ever been caught, and only about 10 people in the United States are serving time for this kind of crime. (No one has died in any of these attacks.)

Luers' supporters say his sentence is far longer than the act of simply burning three cars would seem to warrant, and he continues to appeal. Supporters have organized chapters in 35 cities and 11 countries, and they say Luers is a political prisoner rotting in prison because of the way he expresses his political beliefs.

This month marks the start of Luers' fifth year behind bars. Though he's imprisoned, Luers is still active in the radical environmental movement. Since successfully fighting an effort to censor him, he has participated in interviews, written articles and letters from prison and contributed to a [zine](#).

Meanwhile, the specter of "ecoterror" has, in the eyes of the federal government, become more dire than ever: In March, a list of domestic-terror threats from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security included [environmental extremists](#) right behind groups such as al Qaeda. Indeed, a number of local environmental activists have been subpoenaed to appear today before a [federal grand jury](#) investigating a pair of 2003 bombings in the East Bay.

I first contacted Jeff Luers in writing at the Oregon State Penitentiary, in Salem, and last week I spoke with him by phone.

**Gregory Dicum:** Did you consider yourself engaged in terrorism when you set fire to those SUVs?

**Jeff Luers** No. Really, when you look at the use of the word today, terrorism is nothing more than a way to define armed struggles that you disagree with.

We were trying to draw attention to the use of resources in America that are contributing to climate change and global warming. Obviously, during an act of

property destruction, objects are smashed, burned or demolished. That happens. But what makes an individual act of sabotage more heinous than crimes committed by governments and transnational corporations? If we're going to look at the definition of terrorism or the definition of violence, then we need to put it in its proper perspective. We certainly ought to open the definition up to corporate destruction of rivers, forests, oceans and all ecosystems, because those certainly aren't acts of love.

**GD:** The SUV caper wasn't your first attempt to bring attention to environmental issues. What other efforts had you been involved in prior to that action?

**JL:** I had been involved in civil-disobedience direct action. I spent a year and a half in an endangered old-growth forest outside of Eugene. I've done tree sits, roadblocks, lockdowns and some more confrontational things. I've been involved in street protests. I've met with and lobbied members of Congress. I've debated with timber-industry officials.

**GD:** Was burning the SUVs the most extreme thing you'd done?

**JL:** Yeah, I'd say it was.

**GD:** Were you conscious of it being a step in a new direction for you?

**JL:** I was trying to move into the realm of more radical actions. If you compare arson actions that have happened in the U.S., the majority of them were quite major. That's the goal that I was working toward -- to be more of an underground guerrilla activist. The SUVs were kind of a baby step.

**GD:** Even so, the judge threw the book at you. Was this an effort to make an example of you, or was it just the start of tougher sentencing in general?

**JL:** About six months ago, there was a man from [Springfield](#) who took his case to trial -- he didn't take a plea bargain. He was accused of multiple counts of arson in the City of Springfield [Oregon] for lighting apartment buildings on fire. And in every single one of his fires, people actually had to be evacuated. The fire department had to do door-to-door searches to ensure that no one was in the buildings. He very, very clearly put people in danger, and he was sentenced to 15 years -- seven years less than me.

I'm obviously biased, but I have to say that my sentence is out of the norm. The only official explanation that has ever been given came from Kent Mortimore, chief deputy D.A. in Lane County [the county in which Eugene is located], who says, basically, bottom line, I'm a terrorist and I got what I deserved.

**GD:** At the same time, the sentence has increased your platform and your notoriety. I wouldn't be talking to you if it hadn't been so unusual, for one thing.

**JL:** Yeah, I think their idea backfired. I think the goal was to make me serve as a deterrent to anyone else that wanted to be involved in radical actions and dissent. And I think that they failed to understand that all they did was galvanize my position.

With the growing [trend](#) toward eco-tage in this country, I think that they looked

upon me as representing that as a whole. But I didn't back down. I didn't plea out, and I didn't make apologies.

**GD:**And even after you were sentenced, since you've been in prison, you've had to face unusual restrictions.

**JL:** Yeah. Back in 2003, the [state Department of Corrections (DOC)] told me that I would not be able to write about or express my political ideology, or write about environmental- or social-justice movements or issues. I was told that every time I did, it would be considered a gang member-type thing, and that I would be punished accordingly. I quickly filed suit against the DOC for violation of my First Amendment rights, and they very quickly decided to settle out of court.

**GD:**And, as a result, you can talk to me today.

**JL:** Actually, they're censoring me again. They're censoring my outgoing mail when they consider it endorsing or supporting anarchist or environmental activity. CNN and "60 Minutes" have recently been denied access to videotape me. I just recently filed a notice of intention to sue because of this. If the DOC knew that I was talking to you, I'm not sure how they would view it.

**GD:**I take it these are not ordinary restrictions in American prisons?

**JL:** If they are, I have not seen it in Oregon.

**GD:**Going from the life of an eco-anarchist in the Oregon woods to the top-down, rules-focused life of prison must have been quite a change for you.

**JL:** It sucks really bad. All the stereotypical things that you see in the movies -- that stuff happens here. But it hasn't broken me, and it can't break me. I just accept this environment as home -- my ability to deal with it has really surprised me.

Part of it's just survival. But the other part is trying to remain active and inspirational to the folks on the outside that are working for change. I want people to know that prison isn't the end of being able to be involved; it's not the end of your life.

It really warms my heart to know that all those people around the world are supporting me and are getting active. It lets me know that everything I did wasn't in vain, that what I did made a difference.

**GD:**As you know, the Department of Homeland Security has recently identified eco-sabotage as one of the top domestic terror threats the United States faces. Do you think the government is justified in seeing the type of action you took as a serious threat to the nation?

**JL:** It's interesting, because you have to look at the ideals behind our government. It's very well known that the government, time and time again, tries to side with corporate interests. Those corporate interests have trumped environmental protection, they have trumped endangered species, they have trumped poor communities trying to keep toxic waste dumps out.

This [eco-sabotage] movement has specifically targeted corporate entities. They have found those transnational corporate entities that are polluting and destroying

and wreaking havoc on the environment, and they have targeted them with property destruction.

Now, compare that with the arrest a few years ago in Texas of a man named [William Krar](#). He was arrested and sentenced to 11 years for possessing machine guns, pipe bombs and a 100-pound cyanide bomb -- a weapon of mass destruction, as defined in the USA Patriot Act, which existed at the time. He was a white supremacist and part of a white Christian group, but he was never labeled a terrorist.

So, it goes back again to what the political agenda is. If you target property -- you target corporate interests -- you are somehow more of a threat.

**GD:**In before-prison pictures, you look like the stereotypical anarchist punk. Do you consider yourself an anarchist now?

**JL:** Yeah, but probably not in the way that most people define anarchist. I believe in autonomous self-rule. My definition of anarchy includes the ability of other people to choose to live nonanarchist lifestyles. I think that people need to choose the lifestyle that's best for them, as long as it doesn't impinge on the freedom of others.

**GD:**How does your brand of eco-sabotage fit in with mainstream environmentalism?

**JL:** Like every other historical movement, all facets of the movement work together, even if sometimes they don't agree or even understand that they're working together. More and more, even mainstream environmental activists are understanding and recognizing the need for direct action. And while they don't necessarily condone it, they understand why people partake in it.

Plus, radical actions make other groups seem more moderate. In the late '70s, the Sierra Club was viewed as a bunch of environmental wackos. In the early '80s, Earth First! came along doing tree sits and lockdowns and all sorts of other really far-out stuff, and suddenly the Sierra Club looks moderate. Nowadays, the Earth Liberation Front makes Earth First! look moderate. They all fit hand in glove in creating social change.

**GD:**But a lot of the environmental movement is based on the idea of nonviolence. In their abhorrence at the violence being done to the Earth, many -- perhaps the majority -- of committed environmentalists have renounced any sort of violence.

**JL:** Well, education and ethical debate is a powerful force for change, but it can only sway someone whose problem is that they don't know. It can't reach someone who doesn't care. Industry and government have institutional and monetary biases against protecting the Earth, and no amount of education is going to change their viewpoint.

Now, people need to be outspoken, and everyone who believes that we need to change should do everything in their power -- writing letters, protesting, talking to their neighbors -- but we also need people to go out and commit acts of direct action. We have reached a point where simply being outspoken is not enough.

There is no equality between the average person and a corporate entity. Good, solid communication cannot occur when people are not equal, and that's where we find ourselves. We need to take corporations that aren't willing to listen and force them

to listen, or hurt their pocketbooks. Losing money is the only thing that ever seems to affect a billion-dollar enterprise.

**GD:** I can anticipate some of the e-mail this column will generate, and I'm sure you've heard it before. People will say, "Why are you giving this guy a platform? He's just a criminal."

**JL:** I think that anyone who is quick to judge me for what I did should, at the very least, be quick to judge corporations for what they do. They look at my activities and say that they're wrong because they break the law. But I believe in a higher law: We have a responsibility to future generations and a responsibility to ourselves to challenge injustice. The destruction of the world is injustice. The exploitation of indigenous peoples and peasants in underdeveloped countries is injustice.

I've gone down the road of aboveground activism, I've gone down the road of lobbying Congress, of meeting with corporate entities -- I know what kinds of results they get. If anyone can point out something that works better than what I did, I'll be more than happy to listen. Until then, here I am five years later for burning an SUV, and that one single action seems to have worked out pretty well for me so far. I don't have a problem doing time for my beliefs, because I believe strongly enough in them to accept it. I think that's what some people out there don't understand. The dangers that we're facing -- they're real.

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Gregory Dicum, author of *Window Seat: Reading the Landscape from the Air*, writes about the natural world from San Francisco. A forester by training, Gregory has worked at the front lines of some of the world's most urgent environmental crises. For more of his work, see [www.dicum.com/list](http://www.dicum.com/list) and can be reached at [gd@windowseat.info](mailto:gd@windowseat.info)