

Boots on the Ground, Boots Around the Table: Managing Rangeland Wildfire Risk in Oregon and Idaho

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The rangelands of southeastern Oregon and southern Idaho have experienced increasingly large wildfires that threaten multiple values and can exceed Bureau of Land Management (BLM) response capacity. There has been interest in expanding suppression capabilities through the creation of rangeland fire protection associations (RFPAs), volunteer groups of landowners trained and authorized to respond to wildfires. Another key strategy has been the collaborative development of proactive mitigation measures to reduce the risk of large wildfires. This fact sheet examines how the multiple entities involved in rangeland wildfire mitigation and suppression are coordinating their actions and addressing shared risks through case studies of Harney County, Oregon and Owyhee County, Idaho.

Case Studies

HARNEY COUNTY OREGON

Much of Harney County south of the communities of Burns and Hines lies within the Harney Basin, and is rangeland managed by the BLM, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and private landowners. Between 1998-2001, three RFPAs emerged in the county, and several more formed after severe fire seasons in 2012-2015. These RFPAs added suppression capacity in remote areas, but some conflict between ranchers and the BLM existed in integrating formal fire culture with landowner involvement. This included questions about RFA roles and standards, suppression strategies and tactics, use of non-local incident management teams, and protection of values at risk.

Drawing on Harney County's history of collaborative dialogue to explore social issues related to natural resource management, the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative group was formed in 2014 to help address these conflicts and develop a more coordinated approach to fire suppression, fire prevention, and restoration. The group chose to first collaborate on suppression issues because they were most tangible and pressing. They developed agreements about communication and coordination during transitions in incident management, training and qualifications for RFA members, and post-fire review and feedback. They also supported the creation of a BLM position to liaise with RFPAs in the county. This cooperation around fire suppression was then a bridge to further discussion about mitigation and restoration, first through collaboration to prioritize selected geographies (in the Pueblo Mountains) and plan pilot fuels reduction efforts there through an environmental assessment with the BLM.

A second project to more broadly plan restoration across the mixed-ownership Stinkingwaters area was also initiated. In addition to the wildfire collaborative, other innovations are underway in the county including the use of RFPAs' annual operating plans to obtain funds for juniper removal and other private lands conservation work supported by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

OWYHEE COUNTY IDAHO

Like Harney County, much of Owyhee County is primarily managed by the BLM and private landowners, and RFPAs are a pivotal component of fire suppression. Three RFPAs became active in different parts of the county following the start of the RFA program in Idaho in 2012. RFA roles in Idaho were codified through cooperative agreements with the BLM that specified federal cooperator standards for training, communication, and equipment. The Idaho Department of Lands has helped support and enforce these standards. Addressing agency and landowner conflict over RFA roles and other aspects of suppression has not therefore been as substantial of an issue in Owyhee County.

Collaboration among county stakeholders has occurred here through the Owyhee Initiative (OI), an effort to develop agreement and a framework for management of the Owyhee Canyons of southwestern Idaho. A collaborative focused explicitly on dialogue and building agreement solely about wildfire risk is not present. However, conversations from the OI have been applicable to other efforts around mitigation. For example, a broadly-held sense that Owyhee County has had "too much fire in some places and not enough in others" emerged in part through scientific information shared and dialogue held through the OI. This has resulted in shared recognition of the need for more prescribed fire in certain areas, and the need for full suppression in other areas to protect sage-grouse habitat and numerous other values.

Support for planning new fuel breaks was also discussed through the OI, then further expanded by the BLM and interested landowners into projects strategically located to help protect values at risk. These fuel break projects have incorporated targeted grazing as one of the methods of fuels reduction.



Common Themes ACROSS THE CASES

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- 1** Landowner involvement in and responsibility for suppression response can foster a stronger sense of co-ownership of wildfire risks with agencies.

Through the presence of RFPAs in suppression, landowners and the BLM had to co-manage multiple risks on the fireline. This offered a unique arrangement for working together that was action-oriented, occurred in a dynamic environment, and directly engaged all parties in tangibly addressing values that mattered to them. This also increased mutual recognition of values at risk, including safety, forage, cattle, and future management options.

- 2** Collaboration and community engagement with wildfire in a rangeland context is necessarily more “hands on” than it often is in a more traditional wildland-urban interface (WUI) setting, as people live and work on the land.

Meetings and processes remain essential for planning, building and evolving relationships, and increasing shared knowledge; but tangible outcomes on the ground or that otherwise make a visible difference in something deemed important are needed to retain participant interest. There were several core participants or leaders in each case who remained consistently involved through different stages and types of efforts, while others chose to engage depending on their interest. The time that it took to collaborate on planned management actions on federal land challenged some parties to remain engaged as they desired more immediate “on the ground” results from participation. Staggering future projects to identify opportunities for some early and intermediate actions may help, such as implementing activities first on adjacent private lands, piloting potential treatments in other areas where possible, or gathering baseline monitoring data.

- 3** The organizational arrangements for working together to reduce fire risk vary, reflecting the local context and culture of “how things get done” in each place.

In Harney County, there was a more formal collaborative group as well as intermediary support from a local nonprofit, university Extension, and other actors. In Owyhee County, some conversations occurred through a venue focused on larger management plans and then through more informal partnerships with landowner leaders, without a collaborative group.

- 4** Innovators from within government agencies are necessary drivers of collaboration and change.

In both cases, agency leaders who had specific visions for reducing wildfire risk in partnership with landowners and other agencies were pivotal in fostering the necessary collaboration and/or actions. They set a tone and culture around the importance of working with partners, and attempted to understand partner needs and assets in order to incorporate those into planned management activities. Vulnerabilities may be created, however, if these individuals were to leave their positions and not be replaced by others who shared these values.

- 5** There is interest in both 1) mitigation in targeted locations and 2) landscape-scale restoration.

The creation of strategic fuel breaks was broadly supported in each case study, although there were some concerns about design specifications, impacts to other values, and maintenance. The inclusion of targeted grazing to create and maintain fuel breaks was particularly compelling for some landowners, although implementing this work alongside other preexisting seasonal grazing requirements posed challenges for permittees. Many participants also wanted to see fire risk addressed at landscape scales beyond fuel breaks, but to date, there has been less experience with planning these types of projects, including navigating diverse interests to collectively define restoration in this context and the appropriate tools for accomplishing it.

- 6** There are constraints on where and how prescribed fire may be used, despite interest in this approach.

There was some landowner and agency interest, particularly in Owyhee County, in using more prescribed fire to reduce juniper and improve forage. Fire was seen as a productive tool at higher elevations and under the “right” conditions. But there were several disincentives to using fire. Many areas in both case studies have experienced extensive and sometimes repeated fire, leaving them unsuitable for more fire at this time given the risks of invasive annual grasses. In addition, limitations on grazing following fire and continued threat of any fire in remaining sage-grouse habitat further inhibited perceived feasibility and desirability of adding more fire to the landscape.

Information in this fact sheet is derived from interviews, document analysis, and member checking conducted through an applied research project: *Co-Managing Risk or ‘Parallel Play’? Examining Connectivity Across Wildfire Risk Mitigation and Fire Response in the Intermountain West*.

LEAD AUTHOR: Emily Jane Davis (*Oregon State University*)

PROJECT PARTNERS: Heidi Huber-Stearns (*University of Oregon*), Tony Cheng and Mike Caggiano (*Colorado State University*), and Darren McAvoy (*Utah State University*).

FUNDER: Joint Fire Science Program | LAYOUT/DESIGN: Casey Davis (caseydavisdesign.com)

PROJECT WEBSITE: <http://www.nwfirescience.org/CoManagingRisk>