



RFPAs Receive Funding, Recognition from Oregon Legislature

Bill includes \$1 million for support as well as better access to firefighting assets from Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF).

August 2025

By Lauren Brown



A bill signed in July will support and acknowledge the vital role Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) play in protecting working lands and wildlife habitat in rural areas.



Volunteers at the ready

Last summer, Ron Whiting, chairman of the Lone Pine RFPA, spent a month fighting the Falls Fire, which burned more than 150,000 acres, with about 1,200 of those acres within the Lone Pine RFPA's territory.

Pictured: Warren Johnson operating a dozer at sunrise on July 18, 2024 building a dozer line. Photo by Ron Whiting/Lone Pine RFPA.

RFPAs exist in Oregon, Nevada and Idaho to help protect rural areas that would otherwise lack fire protection. They are associations made up completely of volunteers. "They're schoolteachers, farmers, ranchers, business owners. They're just community members that are out there trying to serve our community," said Oregon Representative Mark Owens (R-Crane).

Whiting said normally his RFPA might respond to a few incidents per summer: maybe a single tree fire caused by a lightning strike or a mutual assist call in another RFPA district. However, the Falls Fire was unlike anything they had experienced before. "This was a scale we weren't prepared for," he said. "We had never had a season like that. A big period of my life just fell out from under me dealing with that."

The birth of a bill

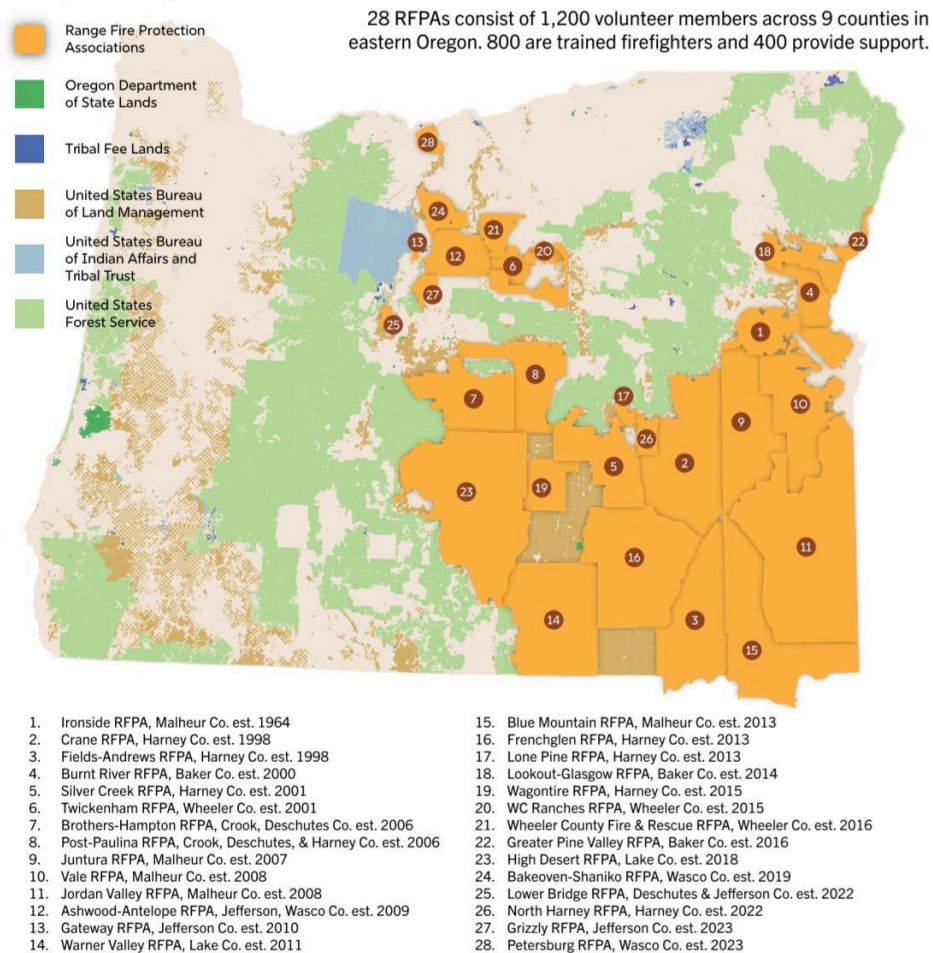
When the Falls and Telephone fires hit Eastern Oregon last year, Governor Tina Kotek made a visit to Harney County and asked Representative Owens to bring together some ranchers to talk about the fires. "One of the bright spots was the work that the RFPAs were doing on the first response and then actually helping the interagency teams get familiar with the community," Owens said. "I wanted to have a positive note that we could talk on and

maybe something that we could work on after that meeting. Governor Kotek appreciated that the conversation went well. She said she was interested in trying to figure out how to help because we had articulated that the budgets, the staffing, and the resources for the RFPAs were very limited.”

Allison Rayburn is the Rangeland Fire Program Coordinator with the Oregon Department of Forestry and works out of John Day. She was included in that conversation. She noted that the RFPAs are set up for initial attack on fires, but these large fires really put a strain on their resources. “We had a lot of breakdowns and a lot of fuel costs,” she said.

With an overall annual operating budget of \$15,000 to \$20,000, Whiting said the Lone Pine RFPA spent \$6,000 on fuel and repairs while fighting the Falls Fire. He said they were lucky that they had built up a \$5,000 emergency fund and had grants and private donations to pay for the extra costs.

Oregon Rangeland Fire Protection Associations



Owens said many RFPAs do not have enough funding to cover personal protective equipment, radios, or tires for vehicles. “More often than not, they end up putting fuel in their vehicles at their own farm or ranch,” Owens said. That resonated with the governor. Owens got to work with the assistance of Rayburn and a larger group of RFPAs on something that could be a legislative concept that could help the RFPAs.

Two bills materialized from that conversation. One bill would allow ODF a path to sell or donate equipment to the RFPAs and one bill would be a funding mechanism. As the bills made their way through the system, they had bipartisan support. Then the bills arrived at the Ways and Means committee, and there they sat because the May revenue forecast

was \$500 million less than the previous revenue forecast.

“Getting anything out of Ways and Means was going to be tough,” Owens said. But he got to work contacting the governor as well as other representatives and senators. “We were fortunate enough to get it moved,” Owens said. It passed the house and the senate. During the process, the two bills were consolidated into one, and on July 17, Governor Kotek signed bill 3349. It authorizes ODF to donate or sell depreciated firefighting assets to RFPAs and includes \$1 million to support that work.

Paying for equipment, fuel

Whiting said that last year's fire season was unprecedented for the Lone Pine RFPA, which has 15 members, about a dozen of whom are active firefighters for the RFPA. "We just don't have the people to deal with that, so we dealt with it the best we could, and I felt like we did a pretty darn good job," Whiting said. He noted it was lucky the wind changed when it did, or it could have been a lot worse.

Whiting appreciates that the bill is a nod of acknowledgment to the RFPAs and the work they do as an initial attack in rural areas. Previous grants the RFPAs have gotten have not covered fuel expenses, and the funds associated with this bill will pay for fuel. The Lone Pine RFPA funding priorities for the upcoming year will include upgrades to existing vehicles, adding lights and making repairs. One of their trucks will need a new transmission this winter.

Local donations have also made a difference. "I appreciate the support that we've gotten from the local community. Dusty Threads and Thrift Store dedicated one of their months of sales toward Harney County RFPAs, and we got about \$500, which was greatly appreciated," Whiting said. More recently, the thrift store donated another \$1,000 to the Lone Pine RFPA.



Pictured: Rob Sharp of North Harney RFPA dousing flames.

According to Rayburn, ODF primarily assists RFPAs through training programs. ODF also provides coordination services, a dedicated radio technician, field staff assistance during emergency incidents, and administrative help. Additionally, ODF reimburses RFPAs for vehicle liability insurance and assists them in acquiring necessary equipment. In the past, this equipment was federal or military excess equipment, which can be

expensive to ship and maintain. Parts for repairs can be hard to locate. It can take time and money to alter equipment for the RFPAs' firefighting needs. "This bill opens up another avenue for affordable used firefighting equipment, which is state ODF excess equipment, and so there would be little to no shipping costs," Rayburn said. "We can just move stuff around the state, and they are built to local standards for wildland firefighting, specifically in Eastern Oregon."

ODF is in the process of forming committees to determine how the allocation process will work, while also working to develop implementation guidelines and policies to ensure the funding is utilized as effectively as possible. Rayburn is optimistic that the new system will help the RFPAs. "As an ODF employee, it was hard to see equipment that we knew could be utilized by RFPAs go to public auction and often end up getting sold out of state. To have this additional avenue to help them acquire equipment is going to be a huge benefit to the program," she said.

The funding part of the bill, which includes \$1 million, will be split between the 28 RFPAs in Eastern Oregon, but as to how it will be divided remains to be seen. Rayburn said that these longer duration fires have really taken a toll on RFPAs with limited budgets. "Not only are the volunteers spending 30 plus days away from their day jobs, their ranches, and their other duties, but they are also spending thousands of dollars out of their own pocket on fuel or

tires, keeping equipment running so they can keep fighting fire,” she said. “We’ve heard a lot of talk of making this funding available for fuel, tires, and equipment maintenance.” However, split between 28 associations, the \$1 million may not go far enough. “It is not the end-all answer, but it’s a huge step. Compared to the small budgets they’re on, it’s going to be a huge assistance,” she said.

Recognition of work

“We really appreciate what the Oregon legislature did for us this year. Without it, if other grants go by the wayside, then I think our smaller organizations would probably cease to exist,” Whiting said.

Rayburn said acknowledgement from the legislature is a boon to the hard work the RFPAs put in. “At the statewide level, seeing these resources are a value not just to their own lands, but to the state as a whole,” she said. “That recognition of the value of the RFPAs to the state of Oregon from the bipartisan representatives is huge.” Rayburn credited the work of Representative Owens in getting the bill signed. “He was a key driver. He was engaged in the fires, particularly in the Harney County area last year. He saw and heard the need and he followed through” she said.

Owens praised the RFPAs for making their voices heard in Salem. “I just happened to be able to help that, and without them engaging, without them doing the job they did, we would not have been successful,” he said. “We are very much in need of robust RFPAs for the work they do as the first response to fire. Otherwise, our fire season would be a lot more difficult.”

This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative and the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative.

