



HARNEY COUNTY
Wildfire
COLLABORATIVE

Why Harney County Wildfire Collaborative Began

Megafires. This is a word that didn't exist that long ago but it's now not uncommon for megafires to burn 100,000 acres, 500,000 acres and more creating devastation across the landscape and for communities in the line of fire. There are even larger fires defined now in other parts of the world, Australia had a "gigafire" in 2018 burning more than 2 million acres. For

Harney County and parts of the U.S. megafires have become the new normal. Living in this new normal, folks who deal with wildfires in Harney County decided they wanted to play offense, not defense, when it comes to tackling this new reality.

In December 2014, Harney County, Oregon Consensus, ranchers, the [Bureau of Land Management](#) and [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) convened the [Harney County Wildfire Collaborative](#). A couple years later the collaborative came under the umbrella of High Desert Partnership as the partnership began providing support for the wildfire collaborative to pursue its [mission](#). For those talking about fire the need was recognized for a different type of conversation. Rangeland Fire Protection Association members, federal, state and county employees, tribal members, conservationists, scientists and ranchers wanted to be more effective at fire suppression and expand the conversations into more complex restoration issues surrounding how to make landscapes more resistant and resilient to fire. During this time large catastrophic fires continued to pose a threat in southeast Oregon generating national attention. In 2012 the Miller Homestead fire burned more than 160,000 acres, the Long Draw Fire burned more than 550,000 acres and the Holloway Fire burned almost 250,000 acres in Oregon and Nevada. In 2014 the Buzzard Complex fire burned about 400,000 acres.

Along with the memory of these catastrophic fires the wildfire collaborative began with strained relationships between the federal agencies and ranchers and the local Rangeland Fire Protection Associations that are often first responders to range land fires. Under this strain the collaborative needed to decide what topic to tackle first and they found consensus around fire suppression with the intention to build trust and relationships in preparation for difficult conversations to come.



This plan paid off. The patient work of wildfire collaboration began with a review of fire history and how frequency and size has changed through time along with what factors were driving the changes. With this shared knowledge and understanding, the collaborative members developed creative ways to share training, communications

equipment and communication protocols. This new way of doing business and the relationships that formed have made the wildfire collaborative a cohesive and highly functioning group.

As the collaborative built its foundation addressing the complexities of fire suppression, the work moved to conversations about prevention of megafires and restoration of the landscapes when fires do occur. During

this time new voices from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the [Oregon Natural Desert Association](#) joined the collaborative. With these additions the group put their sights on an environmental analysis in a wilderness study area in the southwestern flanks of the Pueblo Mountain. The Pueblo Mountain area was selected for a 26,400-acre pilot project based on a variety of issues: sage-grouse habitat, wildlife, vegetation, fire risk probability, effects of elevation, weather and climate, past fires, accessibility, response times, water availability, grazing history and Wilderness Study Area implications. Bureau of Land Management staff consider this area the most vulnerable of the remaining large blocks of high-quality sagebrush habitat on the Burns District.



With fire prevention and restoration in mind, this project provides an opportunity to test and evaluate the effectiveness of various tools in decreasing the potential for and impacts of large-scale wildfires in Harney County. The group is focusing on a narrow 10-mile corridor along the Funnel Canyon-Oregon End Road where fuel reduction treatments and restoration of native grasses could help slow or stop a fire.

Building from this work and experience the collaborative is now in the initial stages of developing options for a larger-scale project in the Stinkingwater region. This work has begun with conversations with area landowners to learn their knowledge of the area and what can be done to reduce the risk of large fires. These conversations and many other factors will guide the collaborative toward choosing the next pilot study area and developing more best practices for fire suppression and restoration.

Megafires and wildfires are now part of our lives and the landscape. Because of this, the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative will always have more work to do, conversations to have and suppression, prevention and restoration practices to learn. In this era of megafires the collaborative is committed to preventing wildfires whenever possible and restoring the land when they do occur.

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

