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Neighbors Helping Neighbors

How Rangeland Fire Protection Association volunteers and federal and state agencies worked together to fight the wildfires of the summer of 2024.

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This summer, as wildfires raged across the Pacific Northwest, the vast rangelands and forests near Harney County faced an unprecedented challenge. The Falls and Telephone Fires—which started in July but raged for over a month, consuming more than 200,000 acres—contributed to a record-breaking season for Oregon wildfires, with more than 1.8 million acres burned across the state. But amidst the smoke and flames, a unique partnership between local volunteer firefighters and federal agencies became a crucial line of defense.

At the heart of this partnership are the Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs), volunteer groups of local landowners who join together to protect their properties and neighboring lands from wildfires. These organizations—which exist only in Oregon, Idaho, and Nevada—play a vital role in safeguarding millions of acres

of rural land that would otherwise lack fire protection.

Area RFPAs can be best understood as “neighbors helping neighbors.” Ron Whiting, chairman of the Lone Pine RFPA, knows the role well. He’s been an active and leading member for years—a jack-all-trades within his RFPA—working to conduct annual meetings, organize and delegate tasks like equipment repair and the preparation of reports. And then there’s the on-the-ground work of actually battling fires. The RFPA’s main mission is the protection of their members’ private property, but they also work to protect Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Forest Service land since it’s often adjoined with members’ property.

More often than not, RFPAs deal with small fires, often those born from a single lightning strike. “We go locate it, put it out and maybe it’s a two-to-three-hour type of deal,” Whiting explained.



But when the Falls Fire jumped the Silvies River on a six-mile front, Whiting and his fellow RFPA members found themselves facing a challenge far beyond their usual scope. It was immediately all hands on deck. “It was absolutely night and day different,” Whiting recalled, comparing the Falls Fire to what he usually sees near his land. He immediately went into planning mode. “Everybody needs to get their cattle out, we need to get all the equipment up there and try to prioritize where we think we can do the most good.”

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

The RFPAs, designed for initial attack on minor blazes, suddenly found themselves stretched thin, a predicament that would play out over weeks of extended firefighting efforts. Emergency

funds quickly dwindled, as did supplies. "We ran out of money for fuel and equipment repairs," reported Dave French of the Crane RFFA.

Despite these challenges, the RFPAs played a crucial role in the firefighting efforts. Their intimate knowledge of the local terrain proved invaluable, especially when working alongside understaffed or out-of-area firefighters unfamiliar with the region, some coming from as far away as Alaska.

"We've had less and less firefighters [over the years] to staff our trucks, so it makes our reliance on [RFPAs] even more critical," noted Shane Theall, Burns Interagency Fire Management Officer. "We didn't expect the fire to run as big as it did." Luckily, the RFPAs were there, ready to help.

Relations between RFPAs and federal agencies, however, haven't always been as congenial and productive as they are today. Both Whiting and French recall a time when relationships were strained. "When I first got involved, it was pretty bad," French

admitted. However, over the past decade, significant strides have been made in improving these partnerships.



Pictured: Rob Sharp of North Harney RFFA dousing flames.

A key factor in this improvement has been the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative, a collaborative that has fostered better understanding and cooperation between local volunteers and federal agencies. "Because of this collaborative, we've gotten additional training through them, we're rubbing elbows all the time, which helps considerably," Whiting explained. "We understand where they're coming from, and they

understand where we're coming from."

Theall echoed this sentiment. Over the last 10-12 years, relations have greatly improved, especially as both sides work together to draw up agreements and put them in language that works for everyone. A decade before it was a top-down model, with the BLM state office dictating policy and doing so in the type of bureaucratic legalese that only inspired headaches and resentment.

Another crucial element in this has been the role of liaisons. Brett Morefield, who recently has worked as a Burns BLM RFFA liaison, described his role as a bridge between the agencies and the local volunteers. It's his job to get the roster together, work with the overhead team, and pass that information along to the RFPAs. "Building a good relationship between RFPAs and agencies — that's what it's all about," Morefield said.

Funding for these liaison positions, however, remains a challenge. The position Morefield fills is currently unfunded, and this year he took on the responsibility in addition to his regular job as a Fuels Planner for the BLM. Both Morefield and Theall stress the importance of reinstating and expanding these liaison positions.

While the immediate crisis of the Falls Fire has passed, the work is far from over. Josh Giles, Malheur National Forest Emigrant Creek District Ranger, highlighted the numerous clean-up projects as top priorities.

"Something like 240 miles of dozer lines—that requires a significant amount of repair so we can stabilize the resources and so we don't have any flooding or erosion later," Giles explained. Some projects, like replacing fences, could take a year. Reforestation efforts could take as many as five years. "There's an enormous amount of work to do," Giles said.

The firefighting efforts have also provided valuable lessons about fire management strategies. Giles noted that in areas where forest treatment had been carried out – via methods like mechanical thinning and controlled burns – the fire's impact was less severe. And while Giles said that it's too early to draw definitive conclusions he was, after initial inspections, optimistic about the treatments' positive impact.

Despite the successes, significant challenges remain for the RFPAs. Funding tops the list of concerns. The available federal grant monies that many RFPAs rely on hasn't increased in years, leaving them struggling to cover rising costs. "They've got to find a better way to fund us," French said. "I'm spending \$5,000 to \$6,000 on repairs, tires, and fuel. I can't imagine how some of these other guys are struggling."

Manpower is another pressing issue. Many RFA members are ranchers who had to prioritize their livestock and other holdings as the fires exploded in size. "We were so thin as far as help," Whiting recalled. "How do we get more active members in our group that will take the training and fight fire?"

Allison Rayburn, Rangeland Fire Program Coordinator for the Oregon Department of Forestry, summarized the dilemma well. She said RFPAs have a huge advantage in terms of local resources and familiarity with the land. But the systems are designed to help them with initial attack. They're not designed for large, long, extended attacks with incident management teams. Nor are RFPAs funded for such work.

Looking to the future, all parties agree that now is the time to address these challenges. Especially as these catastrophic fires—wildfires that grow beyond 100,000 acres—become increasingly common. "[It's] no longer a possibility but a reality," Rayburn said of the threat posed by such fires. She suggested that informational gathering meetings and needs assessments should be among the first steps.

For the RFPAs, the immediate future involves cleanup and rehabilitation. Hundreds of miles of fences need replacing, and decisions must be made about reseeding burned areas. The financial and labor demands of these tasks are daunting, especially for volunteer organizations already stretched thin.

Despite these challenges, the overall sentiment is one of cautious optimism. The improved relationships between RFPAs and federal agencies have laid a foundation for better cooperation in the future. The heroic efforts of volunteers and professionals alike during the Falls and Telephone Fires have demonstrated the community's resilience and commitment to protecting their lands.

As Harney County and its neighbors look toward future fire seasons, the lessons learned from the summer of 2024 will likely prove invaluable. The story of the Falls and Telephone Fires is not just one of destruction, but also one of cooperation, innovation, and the indomitable spirit of rural communities facing unprecedented challenges. In the sagebrush steppe and forestlands of Eastern Oregon, neighbors helping neighbors may well be the key to resilience in an era of increasing wildfire threats.

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

