



# Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resiliency Project Funding in Action

This funding is being used to address fire suppression, prevention and restoration of the Southeast Oregon sagebrush sea landscape.

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By Scott Barton

Residents of rural Southeast Oregon have all witnessed the damage that wildfire can cause. It only takes a short look back in the region's history to recall the devastation caused by fires like the Long Draw, Miller Homestead, Buzzard Complex, and Holloway.

In the sagebrush steppe landscape that occupies some 23 million acres in Oregon, wildfire knows no bounds. The toll it takes on the land, resources, wildlife, and rural communities and economies is untold. In the wake of the fires mentioned above, residents and stakeholders in Harney County agreed that the conversation surrounding wildfire needed to change.

## **The Harney County Wildfire Collaborative is Born**



In the winter of 2014, in the wake of the devastation the Buzzard Complex Fire left behind, Harney County residents, local ranchers, Oregon Consensus, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife came together to form the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative.

*Pictured: A scene from the Miller Homestead Fire.*

Just a couple short years later, the Collaborative came under the umbrella of High Desert Partnership. With the goal of providing a platform where everyone could have an equal and valued seat at the table, the hard work of formulating a more effective and comprehensive wildfire strategy began to unfold.

Rangeland Fire Protection Association members, county, state, and federal employees, Burns Paiute Tribal staff, conservationists, scientists, and ranchers dove headfirst into complex conversations about how to make Harney County's landscapes and ecosystems more resistant to fire and resilient in the aftermath.

The work began with developing a keen understanding of the history of wildfire, and the complex ever changing factors that have shaped that history. From there, the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative was able to develop new and more efficient methods of sharing training, communications equipment and protocols. The inclusive efforts of the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative proved highly effective in the early years, when initial work centered around what could be done to suppress low elevation wildfires when they came up.

However, with added expertise and involvement from all parties, conversations quickly became more proactive about how wildfires could be prevented, and how landscapes and ecosystems could be restored for the future benefit of all.

### **Stinkingwater Mountains Restoration and Fire Resilience Project**

When the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative was formed in 2014, the Buzzard Complex Fire had left hundreds of thousands of acres in the Stinkingwater Mountains charred and scorched. Livestock and native species were killed or injured, and private property incurred immeasurable damage.



Beginning in 2018 the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative identified the next project area to focus on selecting the Stinkingwater Mountains near Burns and Crane. This project targets 312,000 acres of private, tribal, state and federal lands for active restoration and suppression management efforts with the goal of creating a landscape that's healthy, more tolerant to fire, and provides both forage for livestock, and habitat for wildlife.

Actionable steps are well underway and include:

- controlling the invasive annual grass population;
- decreasing the number of Juniper trees;
- increasing the volume of large perennial bunchgrasses;
- identifying potential control lines and creating fuel breaks;

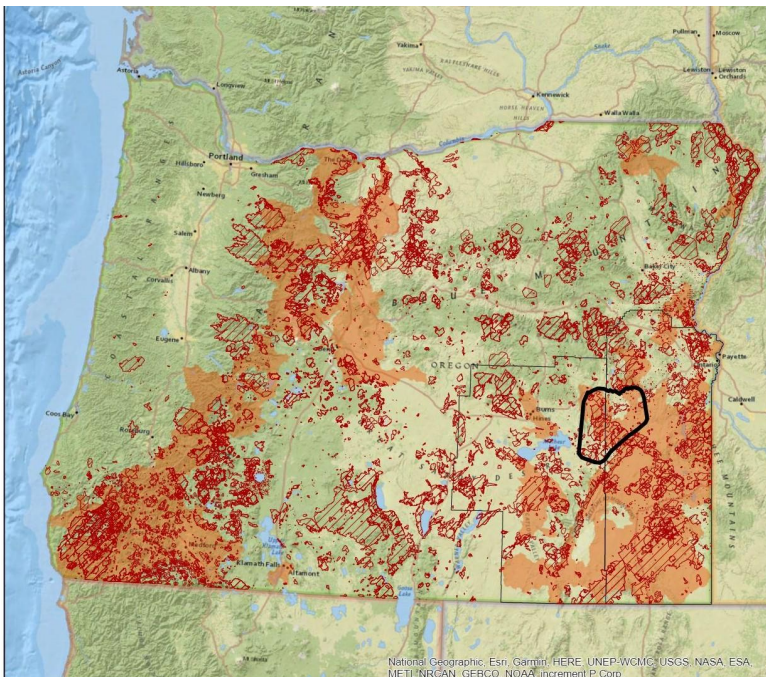
- and continuing to collaborate with all interested parties to achieve desirable outcomes in the future.

While the work that's been done so far is commendable, it's essential that it continues in the future. High Desert Partnership and the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative realized that for this work to continue, resources were needed.

### The Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resiliency Project

In 2021, Oregon Senate Bill 762 was passed. The bill promised “more than \$220 million to help Oregon modernize and improve wildfire preparedness through three key strategies: creating fire-adapted communities, developing safe and effective response, and increasing the resiliency of Oregon’s landscapes.”

*Pictured: Outlined in black is the project area for the Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resiliency Project.*



Upon the Bill’s passage, High Desert Partnership and the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative spearheaded the effort in applying for, and eventually securing more than \$5 million to address wildfire issues in Harney and Malheur Counties. “More than 20 individuals and organizations came together to envision, define, and find common ground on this project,” according to Josh Hanson, High Desert Partnership’s Forest and Range Ecological Coordinator. “They included multiple ranchers; Bureau of Land Management representatives from offices in Vale and Burns; the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife; the Oregon Department of State Lands; EcoSource Native Seed and Restoration; the Burns Paiute Tribe; Harney Soil Water and Conservation District; Harney County Cooperative Weed Management Area, and Pheasants Forever to name a few.”

The work already being done under the Stinkingwater Mountains Restoration and Fire Resilience Project has

been bolstered and expanded under the Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resiliency Project thanks to the funding from Senate Bill 762. It now encompasses the Beaver Tables area and landscapes near Juntura and Jonesboro, expanding all the way into Malheur County. Ongoing work under the Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resiliency Project largely concerns fire suppression and prevention, fuels and vegetation management, and native landscape restoration.

### Funding in Action

Ahead of the upcoming wildfire season, the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative is hard at work getting ready. Hanson says, “plans are in place to spray herbicide on some 120 miles of well-traveled roads throughout the area. . . This will not only create fuel breaks to help with containment, it will give fire crews more access and help them stay safe when they respond to fires in the future.”

Private landowners are seeing benefits from the Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resiliency Project too. Harney County Cooperative Weed Area Management Coordinator, Tyler Goss, has been more than busy working with local ranchers to combat the invasive Medusahead grass on their land. He says, “the non-native grass has no nutritional value to cattle or native wildlife, and its seeds get in their hooves and cause bodily harm.”

Goss continues, “applications that have worked to treat Medusahead in the past haven’t been as effective as they need to be. However, we’re highly optimistic about a new spray called Rejuvra. Not only does the application kill Medusahead as it grows, it facilitates conditions for the re-growth of native grasses that have been pushed out. . . So long as treated areas remain relatively undisturbed in the coming years, I think the future for Medusahead mitigation is bright.”

Goss was also quick to point out the importance landowners and ranchers play in the ongoing work of Harney County Wildfire Collaborative and the Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resiliency Project. “Ranchers know the land well. When they see the positive impacts our work has on the landscape, and therefore they’re livelihood, they’re more than happy to be part of the conversation. . . The best part is that the majority of our work doesn’t cost them anything.” Goss’ schedule isn’t going to lighten up anytime soon. He’s in the middle of finalizing more than 13,000 acres to spray with Rejuvra.

While fire suppression, prevention, and landscape resiliency are at the core of the work being done, there are other beneficiaries as well. “A lot of the efforts on tribal lands within the Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resiliency Project involve the mitigation of Medusahead through spraying and seeding native bunch grasses. While this certainly has elements of fire prevention to it, we look at it as equally important work for wildlife habitat and forage. . . The sagebrush steppe is important for all kinds of native species, including Mule Deer that winter on the land,” says Carter Crouch, Wildlife Program Manager for the Burns Paiute Tribe.

## **Looking Forward**

Money received from Senate Bill 762 and allocated for the Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resiliency Project has to be used by June of 2023. With that being said, the work that the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative continues with the Stinkingwater Mountains project and the Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resiliency Project aims to lay the groundwork for a sustainable future beyond 2023. Fostering fire-resistant and resilient communities and landscapes takes time and is never ending. Wildfire knows no boundaries and neither does Harney County Wildfire Collaborative's efforts.

Central to that mission for the Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resiliency Project is replacing invasive annual grass and western Juniper encroached zones with species that are more resistant to fire. The Harney County Wildfire Collaborative and its partners have adopted a “defend and grow the core” strategy that targets healthy, fire-resistant areas, and seeks to expand them.

Specific plans going forward include:

1. Aerial applications of pre-emergent herbicide to be applied to 65,455 acres of private, tribal, state and federal land to inhibit germination of invasive annual grasses.
2. Some 120 miles of roadside spraying that will decrease invasive annual grass spread and potential human ignition of fires.
3. Contracted juniper cutting and burning on 1,000 acres. This effort is essential for protecting Sage Grouse habitat and reducing fuel loads.
4. Seeding 2100 acres with grasses and shrub seeds following an invasive grass herbicide application.
5. The collection and cleaning of native plant seeds from strategic sites in both Harney and Malheur Counties. The next step being collaborative work with landowners to grow the hand-collected seeds for future restoration efforts.
6. Continual collaboration amongst Harney County Wildfire Collaborative partners on ongoing project progress, what comes next, issues and opportunities.

## **Why is This Work So Important?**

Southeast Oregon boasts some of the most remote country in the West. Its vast seas of sagebrush steppe are where rural residents reside, make a living, recreate, raise their families and where others come for solitude and adventure.

High Desert Partnership, the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative, and all the partners involved realize the importance of this land. As such, managing it is a complex and intertwined pursuit that requires valued input from all stakeholders. That's certainly proven true with the Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resiliency Project, the critical work that's been done so far, and efforts that will continue well into the future. Josh Hanson adds, "This marks a great representation of what can happen when people come together, listen to each other, and collaborate. High Desert Partnership, the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative, and partners herein continue to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those in our rural communities that all too often go underserved."

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

