

How Trust Helps Tame Wildfires

Aided by a bridge-building nonprofit, randers and federal officials learn to work together in Oregon's high desert.

By Geoff Nudelman for Chronicle of Philanthropy, July 31, 2024



HARNEY COUNTY, ORE.

The sagebrush in eastern Oregon's high desert crinkles like crumpled aluminum foil as we drive at a cow's pace through rancher Gary Miller's property. Horses, cows, and antelope vastly outnumber humans.

It doesn't take long for Miller, 60, to talk about the ways wildfire has touched, torched, and shaped his life. In a 1990 fire, his family lost nearly a million board-feet of timber. Other ranchers' horses were burned to death. He and his father sued the U.S. government, hoping to recoup severe economic losses from what they believed was gross mismanagement of the fire. They lost the suit. In 2012, wildfire again ravaged Miller's land. And again, he concluded that federal officials were to blame.

Throughout the West, there's a long history of tensions over firefighting strategies. The magnitude of what's at stake — for ranchers, residents and federal land officials — is in the headlines once again this summer, as blazes spread throughout California, Oregon, and other Western states.

In the past month, Oregon firefighters have battled to contain the Falls fire in northern Harney County, less than 90 miles from Miller's ranch. That blaze spread across more than 142,000 acres before being brought under control.

What's notable about Harney County is the area's hard-won success in overcoming a legacy of distrust and failed communications between ranchers and federal officials. Aided by the [High Desert Partnership](#) — a local nonprofit dedicated to helping people find common ground on tough issues — ranchers and BLM officials have smoothed a relationship once as rocky as the ridges on the Miller Homestead.



Mike McMillan/USFS A crew fighting the recent Falls Fire in eastern Oregon hikes to the fireline.

“We needed to get involved,” Miller recalls.

Talks started slowly. The federal [Bureau of Land Management](#), or BLM, wanted to rely on its traditional and largely effective approach, which harnesses fire-fighting resources from across the federal ecosystem. Ranchers felt that their approach to land management — and their generational knowledge about fighting fire — was being overlooked. “The beginning was kind of like a couple of scorpions dancing around each other,” says Mike Fox, 78, a retired attorney who acted as a go-between.

Then, gradually, the two sides forged a healthier and more productive relationship. One key breakthrough: giving ranchers a seat at the table for incident command, the central point of firefighting strategy. A steady dialogue produced a milestone agreement in eastern Oregon wildfire response — and an example of how an unlikely peace can be won.

Generations of Battling Fires

Gary Miller’s connections to this expanse of southeast Oregon run deep. He’s a fifth-generation rancher with family roots that go back to the Oregon Trail. In addition to his wife, Michelle, two of his sons, his son’s wife, their child, and a ranch hand live here, too.

Miller knows the land in and out. This season, his stories of its history and intricacies are slowed slightly thanks to a kick in the face by a horse in January. Medical care required a 200-mile drive to Bend, where he endured a partial reconstruction of his jaw, mouth, and some teeth. When I ask how he’s doing, Miller shrugs. He still doesn’t have feeling in the bottom half of his mouth.

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We’re nearly a mile above sea level, and the closest towns of any meaningful size (Burns and Hines) are more than an hour north. Miller technically resides in Frenchglen, a hamlet of about a dozen people. But its few buildings, including the closest BLM fire response camp, are 40 minutes away.

In July 2012, lightning struck a pole along a power line running through the southern Miller rangeland. While that fire initially subsided, it roared back to life the following day and came to be known as the Miller Homestead fire. With the aid of high winds and endless tinder in the form of juniper, grass, and sagebrush, the fire burned 160,000 acres of land that belonged to Miller and BLM.

Miller hesitates to put an estimate on the losses from the 2012 fire, but it’s clear the aftermath felt eerily familiar. “I just don’t think that this fire would have burned naturally across this much land,” Miller says. “I think it would have naturally gone out without any human involvement.”

‘Gary Has Paid the Price’

The vastness and remoteness of the land here complicate firefighting. Access for heavy equipment is extremely limited, and land borders aren’t well-defined. The public/private split follows something of a checkerboard pattern.

Expertise is its own checkerboard. On one level, effective fire management requires the vast resources of agencies like BLM and the U.S. Forest Service. But there’s also an essential role for ranchers’ intrinsic knowledge. They are on the land every day, and they often bring generations of knowledge, with family histories that predate most of these government agencies.

“I like to view BLM as a neighbor with folks, and sometimes there’s a love/hate relationship with neighbors,” says Jeff Rose, the BLM’s long-time Burns District manager, who retired in June. Rose oversaw responses to fires across more than 3.3 million acres of public land, including where the Miller Homestead fire burned.

Rose found his way to Harney County in the 1990s as a research associate at an Oregon State University outpost near Burns. He settled into an initial role with BLM in 1999. In his early years with the government, he got to know Miller as a permittee for various ranching rights. Later, as Rose switched into a managerial role, the two stayed in touch. He and Miller stayed in touch, both for regular permitting conversations and also out of respect for each other.

Looking back on the 2012 fire, Rose says, “We did the best we could at the time when things happened.” But he acknowledges, “Gary has paid the price personally both by bad luck and decisions made by other people.”

Bringing ‘Scorpions’ Together

Shortly after the Miller Homestead blaze, the ranchers organized the Frenchglen Rangeland Fire Protection Association. This new entity gave them a stronger seat at the table under an Oregon statute that grants such associations more rights so their members can better fight fires on private and state rangelands.

“We wanted to see recognition that we were losing our wallet and so much more,” Miller says.

A few years later, the High Desert Partnership got involved. “The ranchers and BLM were not on the same radio frequency,” says executive director Brenda Smith. The nonprofit formed the [Harney County Wildfire Collaborative](#), or HCWC, to get all interested parties — regardless of underlying tensions — around the table. It was time to mend the chasm between ranchers and BLM.

Each of the parties took up essential roles. The nonprofit organization acted as a neutral third party. Fox helped the ranchers navigate the slow cogs of government. And Miller, the leader of the ranchers’ association, served as the ranchers’ chief advocate.

Over time, the collaborative scored significant victories. BLM approved a memorandum of

understanding drafted by the ranchers' association that addressed many of their key issues. Save for a few marginal changes, it is still active today and will likely be renewed in 2027.

Because the collaborative brought together parties from across the county, it was also a gateway to getting a voice heard at the state level. Notably, the combined efforts of the partnership and the HCWC have won nearly \$9 million in state funds to fight wildfires in Harney and neighboring Malheur County.

What's more, there's now a fully-funded liaison position for the ranchers' association within the Burns Interagency Fire Zone, creating a vital link in those critical early moments following a wildfire start when quick action can head off a major event.

High Desert Partnership continues to facilitate the collaborative but has scaled back its direct involvement. It now focuses on building relationships and raising funds to support the cooperative.

"If you don't have an organization like the High Desert Partnership, I don't think that there's any other way to start [something like the collaborative]," Miller says.

'We Talk More'

All sides agree they've created a strong working agreement and a vital tool in eastern Oregon wildfire response.

This summer, the near-decade of preparatory work is being tested by [an especially active wildfire season](#) across much of Oregon, including the Falls fire, which is Harney County's first major fire in seven years. Much of the collaborative's firefighting blueprints are being set into motion.

"Now, we talk more," Rose says. "We trust the ranchers, and there's communication there."

The work with Rose in the collaborative also appears to have softened Miller's antagonism toward government.

"Now, I feel really comfortable around those guys," Miller says.

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