



WHEELER COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

SHERIFF CHRIS HUMPHREYS

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To: Judge Perry
From: Sheriff Humphreys
RE: Wheeler County Fire and Rescue
Date: February 2nd, 2016

History

Prior to 2014, Wheeler County faced several issues regarding fire suppression. Specifically, over 500,000 acres of land within the County consisted of "unprotected" areas. These are defined as lands to which no agency or organization had a responsibility to respond and defend in case of wildfire. This issue had seriously plagued Wheeler County for over twenty (20) plus years. Historically, the traditional response was to rely on a disorganized pell-mell of agencies and local ranchers. The local ranchers would often respond with substandard and possibly dangerous equipment. Local agencies found themselves responding to protect areas to which they were receiving no fiscal support to do so.

In 2012 the Sheriff's Office and the Wheeler County Office of Emergency Management was notified by all of the municipal fire departments, and the State and Federal Agencies (ODF, BLM) that they could no longer fulfill what was basically an unfunded mandate in responding to unprotected lands in Wheeler County.

This change of events brought about an assessment of options and highlighted several issues:

- 1) Due to the fact that Wheeler County has the second highest property tax rate in the state, any solution based on a taxation district would result in compression, which would in turn result in monies being pulled from other taxation districts (schools, ESD, Extension Agency). This was exacerbated by the fact that Wheeler County has only around 1300 taxable accounts made this option unsustainable.
- 2) Threat assessment for 2014 indicated that Wheeler County faced extreme risk in the event of massive wildfire due to drought conditions and low snowpack.
- 3) Many of the citizens in Wheeler County had residences that were sited in unprotected lands.
- 4) While there was one Rangeland Fire Protection Association (Twickenham RFPA), many of the smaller landowners were unable to move in that direction due to the burden of the upfront costs involved in creating such an Association.



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The Wheeler County Office of Emergency Management, along with members of the County Court and the Wheeler County Sheriff's Office, held a series of meetings to address this concern to public safety. This group came up with the following analysis and response:

- 1) Any solution would have to be relatively cost neutral to the county, as Wheeler County is suffering from dire financial constraints.
- 2) The Wheeler County Office of Emergency Management would be the best fit for any organization created. In this way there was a paid position (EM Coordinator) that could function in an administrative capacity.
- 3) Equipment was available from the recently defunct Wheeler Point Fire Department and through a lending program with ODF and BLM.
- 4) The response would be Wildland only and trained to focus on the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI), which is the area of greatest concern. There would be no structural element to the firefighting capabilities as the training and insurance requirements were deemed to be too cumbersome for the County to carry.
- 5) All active members would be volunteers.

On July 12th, 2014, Wheeler County Fire and Rescue (WCF&R) was officially created, utilizing a handful of old retrofitted vehicles and manned by a force of volunteers who had recently just completed their wildland fire suppression training.

On July 13th, WCF&R was called out on their first fire. Over the next month they would respond to thirty-three (33) callouts, directly saving seven (7) residences from being destroyed, along with many outbuildings and thousands of acres of valuable land.

The resultant success of WCF&R in that first year brought about a huge groundswell of local support. Over \$20,000 was donated by locals to keep the program alive. ODF and BLM donated equipment and new vehicles were obtained through Federal Donation programs. By 2015 the amount of volunteers had increased and all of the firefighting vehicles had been replaced or upgraded. Monies to support were placed under the control of the County Court through its economic development fund and an advisory board of local citizens as appointed. By 2015 WCF&R had gained the respect of its State and Federal partners. WCF&R units were one of the first outside agencies to respond to Grant County in order to aid in the defense of its lands during the tragic Canyon Complex Fire.



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WCF&R now has MOU's and operation contracts with all of the local State and Federal agencies in the area and is one of the first agencies called on for mutual assistance by said agencies. As of February of 2016, WCF&R has also been contracted to provide services to one of the long standing Rangeland Fire Protection Associations in Wheeler County (Twickenham RFPA).

Analysis

Traditional fire suppression in rural areas is provided in one of three ways. The first two involve the governmental structure providing protection either through the use of a district, which involves taxation as the basis of its support, or through assessed fees directly applied to the landowner (e.g.; ODF Forest Fees). The third is through local landowners creating a Rangeland Protection Association, which receives a modicum of support through the State of Oregon's Rangeland Program.

It is objectively apparent that neither of these options is a fix all for the Rural and Frontier County's that sit to the East of the Cascades. Diminishing timber funds and the loss of federal reimbursements have meant increased competition for taxation dollars, most going to support schools and other priority services. The ODF pay-for-protection model also presents a problem in that it forces two issues: those who pay get saved while their neighbors that do not get burned out; or, those who pay see their resources being provided gratis to the neighbor that does not pay, but still gets receives help because no one wants to see someone's livelihood get destroyed.

The Rangeland Fire Protection Association (RFPA) provides a good base model. The financial support from the State to the RFPA's, along with the access to used ODF equipment, is a huge force multiplier when it comes to allowing local resources to combat wildfire. We have seen that this is most likely to be the option for larger and more financially solvent landowners and ranching operations.

However, we have observed that the RFPA model also has several issues that makes it difficult to implement. First, the cost and processes associated with setup can be either too expensive or too time intensive for a working rancher/farmer to commit their meager resources. We see this to be true especially in cases of those who own smaller plots of land.



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The RFPA model also suffers from a lack of centralized command and control. This makes it difficult to coordinate training, maintain inventory control, and provide for proper vehicle and equipment maintenance. Since the RFPA is not directly affiliated with the local governmental agency we have also seen RFPA's having issues operationally when it comes to radio communications and local area dispatch centers.

Summary/Conclusion

The WCF&R model is the middle ground between all of these programs. While it does not implement the restrictive funding issues of the district or fee based model, it does allow for better centralized control due to it being associated with the local Emergency Management structure.

The ability to have a paid position that can assist with the administrative duties of any program is generally of greater benefit to the program as a whole. In the WCF&R model, this administrative position is provided by the County Emergency Management Coordinator. This position assists in coordinating the response to all of the issues listed above. It also has the added benefit of the fact that the local legislative body now becomes the fiscal agent. This means all financial dealings within the WCF&R model are subject to state and federal auditing procedures. This insures for fiscal accountability when it comes to the expenditure of state funds.

We conclude that the WCF&R Model has coalesced into a very viable solution to answering the issues of unprotected lands in the Frontier and Rural counties. It can coexist with the local RFPA's in a noncompetitive manner and yet it allows the local government the ability to take a more active role in ensuring for the safety of its citizens and the protection of its valuable resources.

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