

Written by Bob Skinner, he is a 5th generation rancher from Jordan Valley, Oregon, and a member of the Jordan Valley RFPA.

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In 1964, (52 years ago) the Oregon Legislature passed statute enabling the State Department of Forestry to work with local citizens to develop a program where the vast public lands (both federal and state) could receive support in the form of training and certification to combat the threat of wildfire. The RFPAs operate as independent association of landowners that provide their own wildfire protection. More recently (due to the increasing size and frequency of wildfire) this concept has become an extremely important component in the struggle to suppress and control wildfire.

Speaking specifically about the vast open spaces of SE Oregon where I live, the **Rangeland Fire Protection Associations** (RFPAs) have seen phenomenal success on initial attack and in some cases, even extended attack. Since Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands border many of the private land ownerships, mutual fire assistance agreements have been negotiated between RFPAs, BLM and Oregon Department of State Lands. It is an indisputable fact that the size and frequency of wildfire in the Western United States has grown. With shrinking Federal and State budgets for agencies responsible for the management of the landscape, the RFPAs concept literally has gained extreme momentum and success beyond anyone's wildest dreams.

When lightning storms "roll over the high desert" the BLM does not have enough resources to respond to multiple fires set by "dry lightning" across the landscape. Most often the first people to see the initial ignition are the vigilant RFPAs members who are geographically scattered across our district. Also, local knowledge coupled with the best and most sophisticated communication system money can buy are the reason the JV-RFPAs has had such success. As time goes on our fire fighting force continues to expand (currently more than 100 certified fire fighters) and get better and more capable of reducing the risk of large fires.

The effort to protect our rangeland resources is the direct result of the recognized necessity of local rancher participation in the RFPA effort. The State of Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) has repeatedly stated that RFPA efforts have saved the State of Oregon millions of dollars. Likewise, BLM has been very aggressive in their efforts to recognize the benefits of RFPAs. Also, because of RFPA/ODF/BLM partnership we have been able to acquire better and more capable equipment (like all terrain heavy engines, bulldozers and tanker trucks) due to their ability to get very serviceable military surplus. Certainly, here in Eastern Oregon none of this would be possible without monetary help from the State of Oregon and a partnering ranching community. Thus, it is vitally important to protect our local people, communities, rangeland resources and local ranches.

Also, strategic grazing by livestock is increasingly becoming a widely recognized asset for the management of resources. Fuel loads can become too heavy and the threat intensifies proportionately. Recent research has proven that the fire intensity (overload of fuel) can be devastating to the resource. Plant mortality goes up as the fuel loads go up – too much heat kills plants thus leaving a barren landscape behind. Certainly, wildfire is capable of leaving absolute devastation to the local economies, wildlife, and the resource in general. Certainly, it needs to be said that excessive fuel loads make fires almost impossible to fight and contain. Also, safety is an issue as, “out of control – fast burning”, hot fires are life threatening to everything in its path including homes, out buildings, humans, wildlife, livestock.

The partnership and working relationship that RFPA's, Federal and State land management agencies have developed over the years has evolved into a very “smooth working” unit. This relationship has not been an easy or immediate happening. Over many years of being on the fire line together (RFPA and Government firefighters), firefighters (Federal, State, and RFPA) have gained a mutual respect for each other, the invaluable result has without question been nothing short of amazing. There is no question now when anyone from BLM or RFPA arrives at a fire, that we are all working toward a common goal. The Jordan Valley RFPA with the invaluable help of the State of Oregon has been nationally

recognized is a very viable and effective fire fighting force. We certainly don't take all the credit for our success because without our Federal and State partners we could not begin to be as successful as our recent history gives us credit for.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this letter to you today.

Robert M. Skinner

541-586-2282

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