

Good afternoon Chair Golden and members of the committee,

For the record, my name is Michael Kelly. I am a fifth generation dryland wheat farmer in Wasco County. Our farm is located about 15 miles southeast of The Dalles. I am also the President of the Board of Directors for Columbia Rural Fire Protection District. I have served on the board for about eight years, five of those as President.

I fought fire for the first time when I was ten years old, so that makes forty-two years of dealing with fire in our District. Through all those years, I have never missed a harvest--even in the four years I spent at Lewis and Clark College, and following eleven years spent living in Portland. Rarely does a harvest season go by without some threat of fire somewhere in our district. All said, I feel like I bring a unique perspective, both on the front line of fire fighting, and as a board member.

I am advocating today for the change in language, which would allow an area like Northern Wasco County, which is primarily cropland, the access and ability to create an RFPA. There are two basic things that becoming an RFPA would do for us specifically, and I think this applies to any group regardless of range land/crop land ratio. First is the access to physical equipment. It is an easy argument to make in favor of more and better equipment. Though it may be surplus, and at the end of its useful life in the eyes of a particular Agency, small groups like RFPA's can still get a lot of use from some of this equipment.

Access to physical equipment would be helpful, but since the formation of our fire district in the late 1960's, we have always provided our own resources, and we have managed through the years. More important than equipment is the communications and relationship side of the equation. Columbia Rural Fire Protection District has a total of ZERO mutual aid agreements with our neighboring Agencies, and never has had any to my knowledge. The reason for that is simple. We are a bunch of farmers who put fires out, not Firemen. We don't have firehouses with fire trucks in them. Though we do have some training, we do not have the accredited and credentialed training required for our border neighbors (Mid-Columbia Fire and Rescue and ODF specifically) to see us as anything but a liability. This makes communication and teamwork all but impossible during an actual fire. Becoming an RFPA necessarily gives the group that legitimacy in the eyes of other agencies, because the training comes from ODF itself. The ability to help one another and fight seamlessly together when a fire approaches a particular road or boundary would be a game changer for our area.

In conclusion I would like to thank the committee for hearing my testimony on the RFPA language changes today. As a district, we have for some time wrestled with the question of what to do with ourselves as a group going forward. The answer has always headed us in the direction of the RFPA—it is just a better fit for a group like ours than being a Fire District, but the roadblock has always been the cropland range land ratio. My hope is that this will be changed in a way that increases participation, and ultimately reduces loss due to wildfire.