



House Emergency Management, General Government, and Veterans Committee Hearing 12-10-2024 11:30 am

Impact of the 2024 Wildfires in Southeastern Oregon, Brenda Smith, Director High Desert Partnership, Harney County Oregon

Introduction

Today I am coming to you from Harney County in southeastern Oregon. Let me quickly set the stage for you. We are the largest county by area in Oregon and the 10th largest county in the U.S. Seventy five percent of the land is public land managed by government agencies. We are beyond rural, we are frontier rural with 150 miles to Bend or Boise. Harney County population is 7,400 people, many whose livelihood is tied to the land in ranching and farming. Healthy land and natural resources are critical to our rural economy.

High Desert Partnership is a nonprofit organization in Harney County. Our nonprofit plays a vital role delivering services, strengthening our communities, and facilitating community engagement. At High Desert Partnership we build community resilience by enhancing the ability of our partners to address local issues effectively through collaboration. We support six different collaborative efforts that bring people together to tackle complex challenges and opportunities like—restoring forests and wetlands, mitigating wildfire, creating opportunities for youth, and growing the rural economy. We can apply for funding where other organizations cannot and we can fill gaps in funding for a myriad of projects that uplift our communities. In this work we see that our communities are better equipped to handle challenges that come with natural disasters.



We support the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative and Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative, 2 of the 6 collaborative working groups convened and supported by High Desert Partnership. Wildfire and natural disasters in general know no boundaries impacting public, private and tribal lands. Our partners in these collaboratives include the Rangeland Fire Protection Association members, federal, state, and county agencies, tribal members, conservation groups, scientists, and private landowners. This is a diverse group of stakeholders coming to the table to determine how to make southeastern Oregon landscapes more resistant and resilient to unexpected fire.

2024 Season Impact and HDP's role

The summer wildfires had widespread and varied effects on our communities and organizations and on Sept. 30 High Desert Partnership convened both collaboratives to debrief with partners the 2024 season. This is what we heard:

1. Communication: The wildfires disrupted communications between agencies. But many positives were noted around communications. Two Rangeland Fire Protection Association members felt communication and collaboration was better in 2024 than in previous large fires like 2012 and 2017. They felt the fires this year could have been worse. The biggest benefit was the planning and actions done by years leading up to this year. One RFPA member said "If we were just fighting the fire, coming into it blind we would be sunk. Fuel breaks, timber cutting, water developments, mapping of locations, even the work envisioning the "what ifs" –those kinds of things were indispensable."

2. Impact to Ranching & Livestock: There are reports of some high cattle death loss in our area. Cattle that survived on forest grazing permits were removed for lack of feed to their winter grazing area. Often these are private lands that are hayed in the summer for



winter feed. Ranchers faced challenges accessing forage on public lands, leading many to seek alternative sources such as hay or private leases.

3. Restoration Efforts: Coordinating resources for restoration and understanding the bottleneck to restoration are conversations that can be had in the collaborative groups. For example, private landowners are finding logging cost and freight are more than the value of the timber. There is much concern for invasive annual grasses to impact native plants and how effective coordinated cross boundary restoration can occur.

4. Air Quality Concerns: Prolonged smoke and poor air quality led to confusion and concern regarding evacuation levels and procedures. In addition, smoke impacts on cattle make calves more susceptible to pneumonia during the stress of weaning and they may not gain weight as efficiently. Smoke also impacts the growth of hay crops as reduced photosynthesis lowers production due to heavy smoke.

5. Loss of Recreational Opportunities: The wildfires resulted in the loss of recreational activities, such as hunting, along with diminished access to community resources like firewood and negative impacts on local wildlife. Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife do know there were mortalities in deer and elk herds, but not as much as believed. ODFW staff noted that some elk returned to the area before the fires were out. Some fires were patchy and this is often viewed as beneficial for wildlife, much like prescribed fire.

6. Public Engagement: There was increased engagement from the general public and previously unengaged partners with the High Desert Partnership Collaboratives, leading to greater awareness of land management, wildfire issues, and landscape treatments that ultimately leads to better preparedness in the future.



Summary

The ability to be grass roots where those impacted can get information is crucial. Local community organizations such as High Desert Partnership can provide the convening and coordinating across boundaries and agencies as a result of our ongoing support of collaborative groups. We have built the relationships in these long standing groups. Our collaboratives have fostered a better understanding and cooperation between local volunteers and federal agencies. One small example, recently were able to pass through funding from a philanthropic foundation to one of the local RFPAs so they could pay their fuel bill from the fire season. We offer the forum for this ongoing coordination so when the emergency happens our communities can be best prepared.

Additional resources regarding Southeastern Oregon and the 2024 wildfire season.

[Southeast Oregon Wildfire Resilience Project](#) - a short film on our landscape scale, cross boundary restoration work funded by SB762

[Harney Co. - Land Sky Water Soul](#) - a short film about Harney County

[High Desert Partnership 2024 in review](#)

[Article on RFPAs in the 2024 Wildfire Season](#)

[Early Season Response and Resources to Wildfires in Harney County- Aug. 2, 2024](#)