

Rangeland Fire Protection Associations in Idaho

In Idaho there are two options for providing fire protection on private lands that are currently unprotected. One option is through the establishment of a Fire Protection District (FPD), the other is starting a Fire Protection Association (FPA). The primary purpose of an FPD is structure protection; however, wildland protection can be provided. The only purpose of an FPA is to provide wildland fire protection. In southern Idaho at the end of 2010 there were 2.2 million acres of private rangeland without any formalized fire protection.

The concept of Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPA) in Idaho started in December of 2010 when a group of private ranchers got together and determined that they needed a better way to organize themselves and protect their natural resources. With support from Governor Otter, the Idaho Legislature, and federal and State fire managers, ranchers now have the avenues to form RFPAs.

Creation of the associations is a collaborative effort between local rancher, the U.S. Department of Interior federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the Idaho Department of Lands (IDL). The benefits that the RFPAs provide include:

- Taking advantage of the quick initial attack the ranchers can provide;
- Satisfying the ranchers' interest to be active participants in protecting the forage needed for their livelihood;
- Satisfying fire managers' safety concerns by ensuring all firefighters are trained and have necessary equipment and communication;
- Supporting the IDL effort to provide a complete and coordinated approach to fire suppression in Idaho;
- Enhancing efforts to protect sage grouse habitat to the benefit of all parties

The first RFPA was established prior to the 2012 fire season, and total of four RFPAs participated in the 2013 fire season. Currently, the four groups in southern Idaho are located in Owyhee, Elmore and Twin Falls Counties. To date, 170 RFPA members have been trained. The four RFPAs combined protect 660,000 acres of private rangeland that was previously unprotected, as well as providing secondary protection on 2.9 million acres of federal and state land.

This process starts with landowners determining if the need for fire protection exists. If so, the next step is to establish nonprofit status. Following this, a cooperative agreement is developed with the IDL.

The IDL will also facilitate the acquisition of personal protective equipment and radios required during the start up of an RFPA, and the acquisition of Federal Excess Personal Property and Volunteer Fire Assistance/Rural Fire Assistance grant funds. The BLM provides most of the firefighter training at this point, and the ranchers provide initial attack using their own ranch equipment.

A Rangeland Fire Protection Association is a nonprofit organization established to prevent and suppress range fires. It is governed and directed by the members. It is funded by fees set by the local board and grant dollars. Equipment and training are provided through IDL and BLM. An RFPA is not a taxing

district, and it does not provide structure protection. Its purpose is to protect the landowner's investments, assist adjoining cooperators, if asked, and keep fires small through safe, aggressive initial attack.

Currently there are six additional areas where landowners have begun to have the conversation of starting an RFPA. One, possibly two, of the six is scheduled to be up and running for the 2014 fire season, with the remainder to follow in the future.