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GETTING READY

Rangeland Fire Protection Associations, Interagency Fire Center prepare for wildfire season

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Steve Acarregui/BLM

Doug Rutan of the Owyhee Rangeland Fire Protection Association speaks to a BLM incident commander via radio as Todd Gluch of Owyhee RFPA looks on. **BELOW:** A Hotshot firefighter gestures during the Soda Fire southwest of Boise in August 2015.

Doug Rutan has fought wildfires of all sizes, from a few acres to more than 200,000 acres.

He is among a growing army of western ranchers who have volunteered to become firefighters in an effort to stop fires while they are still small.

"Minus the Soda Fire, it has been extremely effective," said Rutan, who chairs the Owyhee Rangeland Fire Protection Association and operates a ranch near Pleasant Valley, Idaho. With the Soda Fire, "We had it out at about 5 acres with the (Bureau of Land Management). And the next morning, 30 mile-per-hour winds came up and it took off. Mother Nature."

Firefighting teams battled the 2015 Soda Fire into submission but only after it had burned nearly 280,000 acres. For the most part, first-responding RFPAs like Rutan's handle range fires averaging 10 to 12 acres.

"Some are an acre, some are 200 and that is what's getting accomplished," he said. "That is definitely a success."

Rangeland fire protection associations are on the rise in the vast grassland and sagebrush areas of southern Idaho, eastern Oregon and Nevada.

Officials from land management agencies — many based at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise — authorize and train RFPA members to fight fires. The rancher-manned associations aim to respond to remote fires quickly, getting a handle on them before government crews and equipment can arrive.

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Lost Valley Farm's owner seeks to sell dairy

Dairy facility, property and cattle herd would be listed at $109 million

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

The owner of a controversial Oregon dairy wants to sell the facility and cattle rather than immediately liquidate the herd as sought by a major creditor.

Greg te Velde, owner of Lost Valley Farm in Boardman, Ore., has asked a bankruptcy judge for permission to hire a real estate broker to sell the dairy and nearly 7,300 acres for $95 million.

Roughly 8,750 milk and dry cows and 3,380 heifers would be listed for $14 million under the proposed agreement with Schuil & Associates, a brokerage specializing in agriculture in Visalia, Calif.

A potential investor may already be interested in the dairy.

During a recent court hearing, an attorney for Washington Agri Investments, a limited liability company based in Spokane, Wash., said the firm is looking at the property.

However, Rabobank — which loaned more than $60 million to te Velde — still wants to hold an auction as soon as possible to sell Lost Valley Farm's cattle, arguing the herd is losing its value.

An auction scheduled for April 27 was canceled when te Velde filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, which automatically stayed all foreclosure actions while he restructures his debt.

Rabobank claims that Lost Valley Farm hasn't kept pace with replacing older cows and is producing less milk than other comparable herds partly due to its "shoestring budget."

"My collateral goes down in value every day," said Richard Rogan, attorney for the bank, during a recent court hearing.

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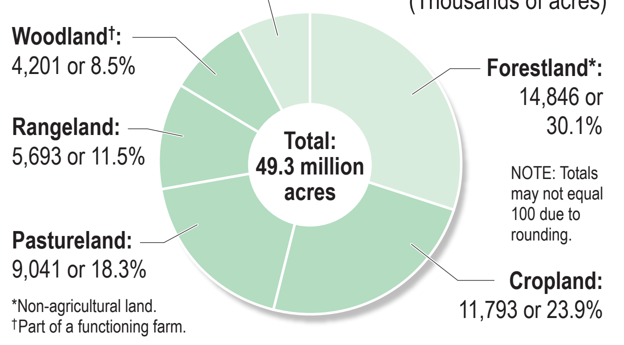
Farmland trust sounds alarm over vanishing farmland

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

U.S. land development, 1992-2012

Land converted to urban development and low-density residential areas.



Source: American Farmland Trust
Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

Across the nation, large swaths of what once was fertile farmland have been swallowed up by housing and commercial development to keep pace with the growing population and economy.

It's a common phenomenon as cities push their boundaries outward. But the rate at which farmland is being lost is alarming, according to American Farmland Trust in its new report on farmland conversion.

"Farms Under Threat: The State of America" presents data showing nearly twice as much farmland has been lost as previously believed.

The analysis tracks farmland conversion in the continental U.S. between 1992 and 2012, showing nearly 31 million acres of farmland — equal to all the farmland in Iowa — were lost to development in that 20-year period.

That's equivalent to losing 175 acres of farmland an hour or 3 acres every minute, AFT points out.

In addition, those farmland conversions included 11 million acres of the best farmland in the country — roughly equivalent to losing most of California's Central Valley, one of the most productive growing regions in the U.S.

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