Officials: Cooperation is good among agencies and RFPAs

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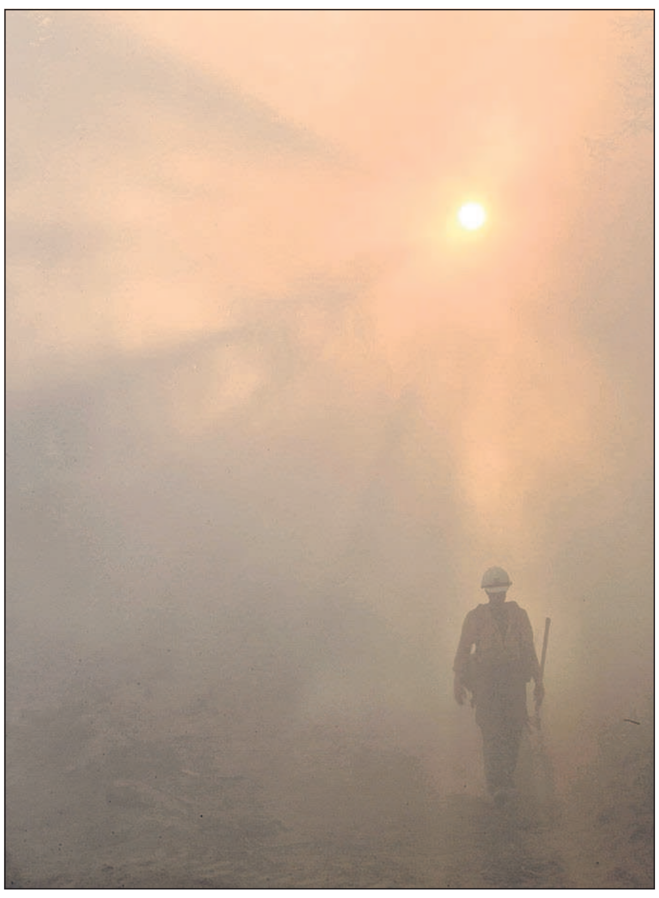
RFPAs also help agricultural producers and agency fire managers to coordinate more effectively by using the same techniques and strategies, communications systems and safety protocols.

"We have had bigger years and smaller years as far as the volume of fire, but I would say we've had a very good working relationship from the start" with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, said Mike Guerry, chairman of Three Creek RFPA serving south-central Idaho and part of Nevada. The association formed in 2013 following an eight-year stretch that included several large fires.

"BLM and ourselves came at it very professionally. Therefore, we have done well from the start," he said. "But we have continued to get better at what we do. As we continue to work together, we learn each other's strengths and weaknesses, trying to compensate for those and working accordingly in the method with which we attack these fires."



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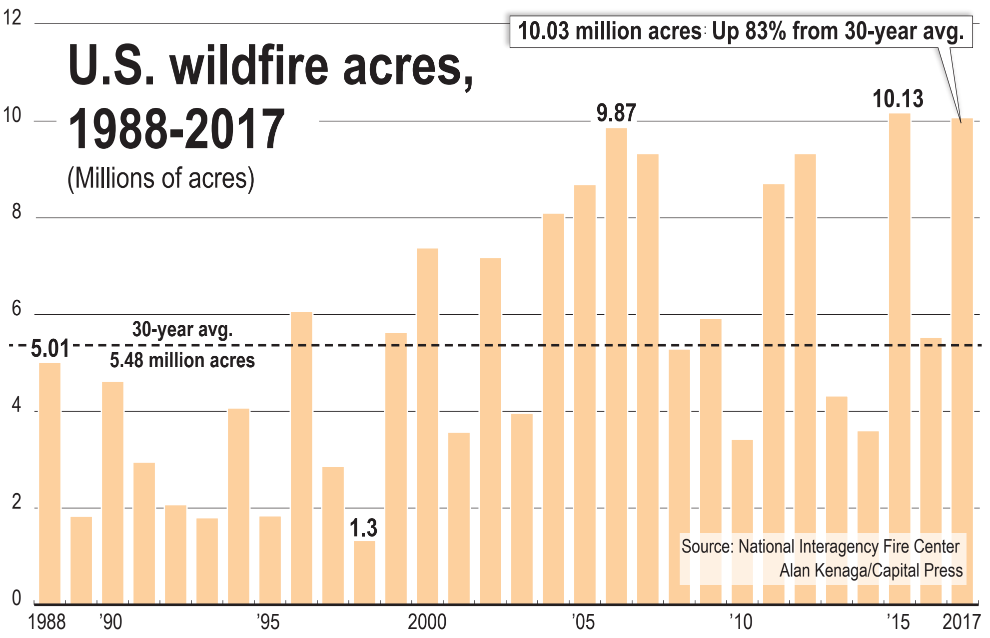
A firefighter emerges from the smoke of the Pioneer Fire in the Boise National Forest, Aug. 15, 2016.



Rutan and Guerry agree that since their associations formed, fire-response times and cooperation have improved while the average size of a range fire, by the time it's stopped, has fallen substantially.

Busy year expected

Both expect a busy fire year on rangeland as heat dries fine-fuel grasses and brush that grew well during a wet 2017.

That sentiment was shared by Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, who in a May 10 briefing said they expect another long, high-volume fire season in much of the West thanks to fuel buildup on forests and rangelands, low snowpack in some areas and high heat.

In 2017, the federal government spent a record $2.9 billion on wildland-fire suppression, the International Association of Fire Chiefs reported March 20 to a U.S. House subcommittee. The average cost from 2008 to 2012 was $1.3 billion.

Proximity to a range fire's starting point is an advantage for rangeland fire protection associations.

"We see them, we get to them and it works really well," Rutan said. "From our watch, you can let BLM know where the fire is, what resources are needed and what they need to be sending."

Guerry said the associations can get to and quickly knock back a range fire early in the year, before BLM has all of its seasonal personnel and equipment in place. By mid-summer, an association may become less critical, except in a first-response capacity, as government assets peak.

"Later in the season, when their assets start getting dispersed or we get a multi-start event, then of course we become more critical again," he said.

Protecting rangeland

Steve Acarregui, the national wildland fire cooperator coordinator for the BLM Fire and Aviation Directorate, said most association members are private landowners — including many who hold grazing permits for federal land they have a vested interest in protecting.

"Many grazing permittees wanted to actively participate in fire-suppression operations on BLM-administered lands," he said.

Oregon's first RFPA dates from the 1960s, but it was 1998 before the state saw another created. The Idaho and Nevada programs started in 2012. Similar programs are under consideration in Washington and Arizona. Idaho BLM and the Idaho Department of Lands developed the current rangeland fire protection association model now being used.

University researchers in Oregon and Idaho last fall reported that eastern Oregon has 22 RFPAs covering 14 million acres while Idaho has nine covering more than 7 million acres.

Using the same training, safety and communications systems enables RFPAs and land agencies to work effectively, said Acarregui, himself a rancher. BLM and the associations integrate operations through the federally mandated Incident Command System, which aims to create a standard approach and universal hierarchy for handling emergencies that can involve responders from several agencies.

Relationship-building between RFPAs and land agencies has been good so far.

'Force multiplier'

"We have developed strong resource partnerships and have been able to make a difference in the area of fire suppression," Acarregui said. The associations are a "force multiplier," and "we want to build a guard station in every remote corner of the West," he said.

Recent years have brought larger and less-predictable wildfires, more fires that threaten structures as more people move to remote areas, and more instances when fires occur in several regions at once rather than following defined seasons, said Randy Eardley, BLM external affairs chief at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise.

"NIFC has grown, a reflection of longer fire seasons, more range fires, and an increased average number of acres burned nationally" each year, said Jennifer Jones, who started in the late 1980s with Boise National Forest before moving into public affairs with the U.S. Forest Service.

Employment at NIFC totals 600 to 650 year-round, and the center can have around 1,000 including seasonal and emergency hires, BLM Public Affairs Specialist Kari Cobb said. Many are long-term employees with wildfire fighting or management experience.

NIFC supports and coordinates management of wildfires and other types of critical incidents. Center occupants include BLM and the U.S. Forest Service, the National Weather Service, National Park Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and representatives of federal emergency agencies as well as state land management agencies.

Other operations at the center include the BLM's Great Basin Smokejumpers, the training unit and the radio cache.

Officials say cooperation is good among the many agencies and the RFPAs.

"Fire doesn't recognize any boundaries. Nor do we when we are managing them," BLM's Eardley said. "One of the reasons this works from Alaska to Florida and from Maine to California is that everyone is trained the same."

Fire dilemma

Individual fire seasons can bring examples of a remote rancher facing a common dilemma: start fighting a fire immediately and risk getting in trouble with authorities, or wait for agency help or approval while the fire gets too big. RFPAs are one solution, though cooperation is not new.

Years ago, ranchers and BLM fought fires together, Rutan said. That ended for reasons of legal and liability concerns, and challenges BLM had in keeping track of everyone — all of which have been addressed through the RPFAs.

One benefit of the rangeland fire protection associations is that a rancher knows where roads, water and other resources are, he said.

Rutan, who ranches in Idaho east of Jordan Valley, Ore., said Owyhee RFPA was formed after he and others on the Idaho side saw the success of a rangeland fire protection association just across the Oregon line.

"They were getting a lot accomplished and putting fire out, and on the Idaho side, we weren't even able to go," Rutan said.

The Owyhee RFPA now covers about 1.3 million acres. About 52 of the 60 dues-paying members are trained to fight fires, having taken an initial 40 hours of training and annual refresher courses. Dues are $200 a year.

Vehicle insurance is the single biggest cost, Rutan said. Another cost has been picking up newly acquired trucks at far-off locations. A new federal law will make it easier for RFPAs to do that.

Acarregui said that in 2010, the U.S. Department of the Interior lost a rural fire assistance program that had been in effect since 2001. It allowed the transfer of federal funding — basically through grants — to local organizations. The new law reinstates that authority and allows Interior to transfer assets directly to cooperating entities, he said.

Going forward, "one of the biggest things it does for us is allow us to be strategic on where we place firefighting equipment," he said. For example, a fire engine that once could end up with any agency or state via the GSA surplus program can stay on BLM-administered lands with a rangeland fire protection association or rural fire department.

"They are the right people in the right place at the right time. The last link in the chain is making sure they have the right equipment to be successful," Acarregui said of RFPAs.

Guerry said Three Creek RFPA pre-stages some assets in the remote Jarbidge Resource Area portion of its coverage footprint.

In June, Three Creek aims to have in service a water tender it is upgrading and a new engine being built with help from a grant, he said.

RFPAs have their challenges. Acarregui said one group was inconsistent in wearing the right clothing and protective gear, an issue that was resolved.

And there is always much to learn.

"I'm hoping the RFPAs keep going. They need to," Rutan said. "It's a good thing. But it's a hard thing, too, because mistakes and hiccups can happen. If you learn from those, fine. If not, the longlastingness of RFPAs may not be possible."

Bank: Facility out of compliance with judgment

DAIRY from Page 1

The dairy lacks fresh water or bathrooms for employees and has lost its milk contract with the Tillamook County Creamery Association, which will stop accepting milk from the facility at the end of May, he said. The facility is out of compliance with its court judgment with the Oregon Department of Agriculture over wastewater management and its general manager and animal waste engineer have both resigned, Rogan said.

Meanwhile, te Velde's own budget projects the dairy will continue losing money, Rogan said. "There's absolutely no way this dairy can continue."

For those reasons, Rabobank is asking the bankruptcy court to lift the automatic stay of foreclosure actions against the dairy, he said.

U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Fredrick Clement, who is overseeing the case, will accept further written arguments on the matter and has scheduled a hearing for May 30 at which he expects to make a decision.

Te Velde owns two other dairies in California that would still be protected against foreclosure under the bankruptcy proceedings — one in Tipton valued at $40 million and another in Corcoran valued at $36 million.

According to his most recently filed financial schedules, te Velde owns $249 million in assets and owes $162 million in debt.

E.J. Harris/EO Media Group

The owner of Lost Valley Farm, a controversial Oregon dairy, wants to sell the property and cattle herd for about $109 million.

Report a stark warning that loss of farmland is serious and will accelerate

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The report is a stark warning that the loss of farmland is serious and will accelerate unless something is done, AFT stated.

"First and foremost, the report really highlights the urgency we have in protecting farmland," John Larson, AFT senior vice president, told Capital Press.

"We have only a finite number of agricultural acres both in this country and on the planet," he said.

AFT's mission has always been to protect the best farming soil and land and to support the farmers who steward the land.

But the report shows "we're doing a poor job, where we're losing our most productive, versatile and resilient land to produce food and fiber," he said.

The best farmland combines high-quality soil, favorable climate and existing farming infrastructure to support intensive crop production. By 2012, that best farmland had dropped to less than 17 percent of the total land area in the continental U.S. and about one-third of all agricultural land.

Digging down

Anecdotally, AFT thought farmland was being lost but didn't realize until the analysis how urgent it is to have a national discussion on protecting it, he said.

Partnering with USDA to use data from the National Resources Inventory in harmony with 40 other data bases provided a comprehensive look at how much farmland has been lost and where, he said.

AFT had woefully underestimated the impact, which was nearly double what the organization had previously thought, he said.

Most of the unexpected loss comes from low-density residential development, houses on 1- to 20-acre parcels, which are no longer productive pasture or cropland — just a yard, he said.

"We woefully underestimated how much of that was happening. It highlights the urgency that we need to address the situation now," he said.

In the time period analyzed, there was a tremendous amount of housing development up to the 2008 recession, he said.

The report "shows glaringly how poorly we have done in developing policy to address that sprawl," he said.

The report finds agricultural land accounted for 62 percent of new development in the 20-year period, with 30 percent occurring on forestland.

Urban development accounted for 59 percent of farmland conversion, and low-density residential development accounted for 41 percent.

In addition, the numbers show that 43 percent of total developed land in 2012 had been converted from farmland in just that 20-year period between 1992 and 2012.

"AFT is not anti-development, by no stretch of the imagination. We recognize the fact there has to be development. But we have to be more strategic about it in the long term," he said.

That means identifying the best farmlands and coming up with a strategy and approach to development, he said.

The stakes

Agriculture accounts for $1 trillion of the $18.7 trillion U.S. gross domestic product. It stimulates another $1.27 trillion in economic activity.

It also protects wildlife and helps reduce air and water pollution. Farmland sequesters carbon, holds more water in drought, suppresses fire and provides for flood control. It also provides scenic views, open space and recreation, the organization said.

Feeding more than 9 billion people in the world by 2050 will require intensive production on no more acres than exist today, Larson said.

Land for agricultural use, including federal land for grazing, accounts for 55 percent of total land in the continental U.S. There aren't enough resources to protect every acre of farmland, but there needs to be better use of land for development, he said.

Federal policy is needed to protect the best farmland with the confidence that it's going to remain in agricultural use. More than 350 million acres of agricultural land is going to move to different ownership of some kind over the next 20 years. There needs to be policy in place to make sure it transitions to the next generation of farmers, he said.

On another front, past policy requiring agencies to mitigate farmland loss has been overlooked in exercising eminent domain, he said.

On the local front, there needs to be policy and planning to in-fill development back into suburban and urban areas instead of allowing sprawl to go unabated, he said.

"Let's not be allowing a one-house-on-20-acre approach," he said.

There has to be a comprehensive and coordinated approach to protecting farmland, he said.

The report is the first phase in AFT's three-part initiative to stem the loss.

"This is the part we're all going 'Oh, my God,'" he said.

The report will be followed later this year by a separate report that analyzes losses by state and evaluates the effectiveness of state farmland protection policies.

More than 20 states have no formal farmland protection program, he said.

AFT will then assess a range of future threats, forecast potential impacts to 2040 at a county level and recommend policies at all levels.