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RANGELAND FIRE PROTECTION ASSOCIATIONS: AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF WILDFIRE RESPONSE

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Wildfires are growing in size, frequency, and severity across rangelands in the U.S. West. Although fire is a natural component of sagebrush steppe ecosystems, it can also threaten values such as sage-grouse habitat, forage for grazing, and residential and commercial structures and encourage invasive plant establishment. Wildfire suppression responsibilities have historically been divided among resident ranchers, some rural fire districts, and government agencies. But wildfire, and interest in managing it, crosses ownership boundaries.

Since the 1990s, numerous Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) have emerged in Oregon and Idaho, and a recent law authorizes RFPAs in Nevada as well. RFPAs organize and authorize rancher participation in fire suppression alongside federal agency firefighters, typically from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). These all-volunteer crews of ranchers have training and legal authority to respond to fires on private and state lands in landscapes where there had been no existing fire protection, and can become authorized to respond on federal lands as well. There has been growing policy interest in better understanding the RFPA model.

Approach

Our study analyzed RFPA establishment, functioning, successes, and challenges through four case studies of individual RFPAs and their respective state programs in Oregon and Idaho during 2015-2016.

Findings

- Ranchers' advantages for fire response are put into practice through the RFPFA model. These include in-depth local knowledge, their own resources and equipment, spatial distribution across large landscapes, and strong motivation to protect their and their neighbors' properties from fire. They can respond quickly, keeping fires small and preventing the impacts of larger events.
- RFPFA-BLM relationships were challenged by histories of conflict, differences between state and federal standards (in Oregon), cultural differences between ranching communities and formal firefighting institutions, and specific negative incidents or experiences.
- RFPFA-BLM relationships were improved by experience and time spent together on and off the fireline, which built common understandings and allowed for informal and interpersonal interactions. RFPFA members increased their understanding of federal fire management decisions, and BLM personnel developed respect for RFPFA members' local knowledge and skills.

- The RFPA model has focused on suppression, but many ranchers view fire management more holistically and the potential may exist for RFPA engagement in a wider range of activities. One RFPA has participated in a fuel break project, and several others have participated in prescribed burns on private and state lands.
- Establishment of research on avoided costs and other benefits of RFPAs would help better quantify their advantages and inform policy.

Implications for practice and policy

- Collaboration for wildfire response may be improved by:
 - Ride-alongs and working side-by-side during fire events;
 - Time spent together off the fireline during trainings, meetings, social events, and in the community;
 - Collective after-action review;
 - Local BLM staff liaisons when non-local incident management teams come in;
 - Transition memos and time allocated for new BLM staff to obtain institutional memory and introductions to RFPAs.
- RFPA program design should take into account:
 - Roles of state agencies relative to and between RFPAs and the BLM, which may include mediator, advocate for RFPA needs, guarantor of compliance with federal standards, grantor, convener, pass-through, or program manager;
 - Importance of informal and interpersonal communications and relationships;
 - Provision of both equipment and training;
- The organizational capacity of RFPAs may be enhanced with:
 - Strong leadership from a chairperson, board, or other leader(s) willing to do organizational and administrative work and set the tone for positive relationships within the RFPA and with the BLM;
- Well-organized and maintained systems for functions such as bookkeeping, member training records, and tracking in-kind and volunteer contributions.
- Other implications for working lands communities to increase their participation in fire preparation and response, and become more “fire-adapted” include:
 - Multiple issues must be addressed, including safety, liability, interfaces with agency and contractor fire personnel, and organizational structures through which participation could be legally and operationally feasible.
 - Learning and adaptation can help ease tensions between volunteer and professional institutions, even if volunteer partners may begin with relatively limited understandings of fire management. Experience, repeated interactions, and being given responsibility may help local participants gain broader understanding of professional firefighting techniques, and in turn increase professional comfort with and regard for local knowledge and values.



More information

To learn more about this research and findings, visit:

<https://tinyurl.com/RFPAstudy>

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