
Paradise Not Lost? Saving Sagebrush Country from a Fiery Fate

Local responses to landscape-level threats generate promising results

By Julia Babcock, National Policy Consensus Center, with support from Jennifer Strickland, US Fish and Wildlife Service

It was hot in 2018. As devastating wildfires fanned across the West, the urgent need to improve wildfire response became a national news story. The conversation was fueled by the deadliest and most destructive fire in California history when, on November 8, 2018, the forested community of Paradise was ravaged by flames, leaving eighty-five people dead, nearly eighty-six square miles burned, and at least 12,000 homes destroyed.



California's Paradise fire left destruction in its path. Photo credit: *Insider*

Meanwhile, in a neighboring state, another paradise was burning: Paradise Valley, Nevada. Almost eight times the size of its California counterpart, the Martin Fire set its own record as the largest fire in Nevada history. It blackened over 670 square miles of wildlife habitat, including a known stronghold for greater sage-grouse, and hundreds of thousands of acres of grazing lands across six ranches. However, this fire in paradise attracted nowhere near the corresponding amount of media attention.



Sagebrush fire in Paradise Valley, Nevada. Photo credit: *The Nevada Independent*

When wildfires and smoke burst into urbanized or suburban communities and threaten lives and property, it's understandable that headlines follow. However, the lack of spotlight on devastating fires in less populated areas and their long-term impacts to rural people and places contributes to a growing sense of urban-rural community divide playing out across the West and the rest of the country today.

“The fact that America’s sagebrush sea is some of the country’s least populated and wildest landscape has long allowed it to largely escape the media and political radar. But that lack of attention is a disservice to the challenges this ecosystem and associated rural communities face, and to the work they are collaboratively mobilizing to address wildfire risk.” says Brett Brownscombe, Project Manager for Oregon’s Sage-Grouse Conservation Partnership¹ with the National Policy Consensus Center² at Portland State University’s Hatfield School of Government.



A sagebrush landscape in the Oregon Badlands Wilderness. Photo credit: Bob Wick, US Bureau of Land Management

Paradise Valley, Nevada, located in the Great Basin, is one of those rural places. Characterized by high, dry deserts and rolling valleys speckled with fragrant sagebrush shrubs, the Great Basin constitutes a large portion of America’s sagebrush country, a quintessentially western

The Sage-Grouse Conservation Partnership: A Foundational Collaboration

The Sage-Grouse Conservation Partnership is a collaborative effort started in 2010 to leverage funding across Oregon’s sagebrush landscapes and build interagency agreements that balance natural resource protection with local livelihoods. Nicknamed “SageCon,” the partnership is structured to develop policy agreements and focus investments across public and private lands to build community capacity in addressing major ecosystem threats, including wildfire and invasive plants. Leading up to the 2015 greater sage-grouse Endangered Species Act listing determination, SageCon worked across Eastern Oregon to build collaborative solutions that promote the bird's conservation. From 2014 to 2019, an average of \$15 million dollars a year in federal investments and over \$1 million a year from state and local partners has been leveraged relevant to implementation of Oregon’s Sage-Grouse Action Plan. (Source: <https://oregonexplorer.info/content/oregon-sage-grouse-action-plan>)

1. Learn more about the SageCon project at the Oregon Explorer website at <https://oregonexplorer.info/topics/sage-grouse?ptopic=179>.

2. Learn more about the National Policy Consensus Center at www.pdx.edu/npsc.

landscape. Some of the country's most sparsely populated and undeveloped lands are found here, and to many, it is a distinct kind of paradise where wild things roam free, where multiple generations of the same families steward the land, and where one can watch an unobstructed view of the sun kissing the edge of the earth at dusk.

Like its sister states in the Great Basin, Oregon is host to millions of acres of rural and rugged sagebrush rangelands. Unfortunately, the health of these lands has been compromised by the invasion of nonnative annual grasses like cheatgrass. Accelerated by human-induced factors and a changing climate, the presence of large swaths of cheatgrass is destabilizing the delicate balance of flora and fauna across an ecosystem that supports thousands of rural communities and over 350 species of wildlife.³

“Stoked by dry, volatile cheatgrass, the wildfires we’re seeing nowadays in eastern Oregon’s sagebrush country are burning hotter and spreading faster than they would have a hundred years ago,” says Jeff Everett, a biologist with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Oregon. “This rapid change poses a significant threat to the long-term health of some of America’s most beloved creatures.”



A bighorn sheep stands in a patch of dry cheatgrass in Oregon as he grazes nearby sagebrush. Photo credit: Dan Dzurisin, Creative Commons

Like Nevada and other Great Basin states, Oregon has seen its fair share of recent and historically large and severe rangeland wildfires. In 2012 and again in 2014, over a million acres of sagebrush burned, impacting wildlife populations and forcing local ranchers to thin or sell off their herds due to lack of forage. Those fires also raised the legal and regulatory stakes for communities of people and wildlife in the context of the greater sage-grouse. At the time, the US Fish and Wildlife Service was considering whether to list the bird under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), a question that continues to percolate today in the face of wildfire and other threats.

3. Jonathon Thompson, “Sage-Brush in Western North America: Habitats and Species in Danger,” *Science Findings*, (Pacific Northwest Research Center), 91, March 2007.

“There was a lot of concern in 2012 and 2014 about the scale and pace at which the landscape burned, and the potential to tip the scales on the listing determination,” says Brownscombe. “Up and down the main street in Burns, I remember seeing semi-trailers full of hay. People in the ranching community far outside the local area had mobilized to help fellow ranch families who had been burned off the land. It was a huge community-based effort.”



RFPA volunteers respond to Bowden Hills Fire south of Burns in 2017. Photo credit: Oregon RFPA Library

And Oregon wasn't alone in its quest to find solutions for its vulnerable sagebrush communities and sage-grouse. As western states grappled with the increased frequency and intensity of rangeland wildfires, many communities began asking, where might the next paradise be lost? Is there any way to avoid it?

Harnessing the Power of Local Communities

In 2017, the 5,800-acre Ana Fire threatened the home of Kevin Leehmann, a rancher and firefighter in South Central Oregon. He responded by recruiting his neighbors to establish the High Desert Rangeland Fire Protection Association, a voluntary force of local residents committed to a shared goal of rangeland fire suppression. Supported by training from the Oregon Department of Forestry and Oregon State University, with equipment provided by the Federal Excess Personal Property Program, the High Desert Rangeland Fire Protection Association is now over ninety members strong. The association protects over 1.7 million acres of private and public lands. Leehmann shared that he only wishes he would have formalized the association ten years earlier.



Rangeland fire protection associations use all-terrain vehicles to reach remote areas. Photo credit: Oregon RFPA Library

With the odds stacked against them, rural communities across Oregon have formed a host of rangeland fire protection associations, or RFPAs. Beginning in 1964 with state enabling legislation and the formation of the first official RFPA (Ironsides, Oregon), the RFPA model⁴ consists of independent, volunteer-based associations who partner to enhance local wildfire response across vast and differing land ownership boundaries. Key partners include the US Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), who work with RFPAs to train volunteers, mobilize aerial surveillance, update communication technologies, and repurpose equipment and vehicles to cover rough terrain.

Now, all of Oregon's sixteen million acres of sagebrush, which cover roughly one third of the state, are protected by RFPAs.

In 2018, twenty-three RFPAs across Oregon responded to 168 fire-starts with only seventeen fires reaching more than 500 acres. Oregon RFPA fire suppression costs averaged between \$70 and \$100 per hour per piece of equipment, a considerable amount less than state or federal fire teams.

But getting to this point wasn't easy. Relationships take time, and they shift as each landowner and the organizations they represent bring their own culture to bear on how they respond to fire risks.

Marvin Vetter, ODF's Rangeland Fire Protection Coordinator likens the process of getting different land managers on the same page for fire response as akin to shifting a dozen CEOs to use the same business model. "In other words, it takes shared investment, open leadership, a lot of discussions, and a keen ear to listen for resource alignment such as shared goals, training, and equipment," says Vetter.

As Bob Skinner of Jordan Valley RFPA put it when presenting testimony to members of the Oregon legislature this past March, "The secret to RFPA success is initial attack and staying vigilant during times of high risk such as when lightning storms appear. The other key has been how RFPAs and partners such as BLM have worked together to change the way we fight fires. For example, when a local RFPA volunteer detects a fire, they contact the BLM and sometimes their aviation team can show up before ground support can."

Communication and working relationships, however, weren't always this good. The history of ranchers and the federal government in the West is marked by no shortage of conflict, so growing collaboration didn't necessarily happen upon a fertile foundation. And, trust and confidence can erode quickly when disparate state and federal standards, cultural differences between ranching communities and formal firefighting institutions, and specific negative incidents or experiences during a fire are added to that foundation. That was the case after Oregon's 2012 and 2014 large sagebrush fires.

4. For more information about RFPAs see <http://www.nwfirescience.org/RangelandFireProtectionAssociations>.

“BLM brings a lot of resources to a fire. In many cases, these resources come in the form of people from other states, who don’t know the local area, and who are taught to do things according to a certain federal protocol. During a high-energy event like a fire, it doesn’t take much for this approach to butt up against local people who do know the area intimately, have their own way of doing things, and who want to be involved,” explains Skinner, who is also a member of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association and president of the national Public Lands Council. “Since the 2012 and 2014 big fires, let’s just say that we have come a long way toward achieving a very good working relationship with our federal and state partners.”

Today, Skinner and other RFPA members talk about the BLM as an indispensable partner and part of the same community, with stories that include BLM firefighters being invited to share in food and drinks with RFPAs, or vice-versa. A variety of factors contributed to the improvement, including engagement in joint trainings (BLM, ODF, RFPAs); increased state legislative investment in RFPAs, which helped improve communication and relationships by upgrading equipment, solidifying liaison staff, and building capacity; and time spent together both on and off the fire line, building common understanding and learning more about wildfire and each other. Oregon’s RFPAs and BLM have since put in place a jointly-crafted memoranda of understanding to solidify the relationship.

“The 2012 and 2014 time period was a turning point in how the RFPAs and the BLM work together. Relationships at that time were tough, and the communication between the agencies wasn’t there. Now the BLM and ODF have taken a different stance by working together to train, communicate, and harness the relationships between all entities, and in doing so the bond between the RFPAs and BLM has never been so strong. All groups are communicating and working together as one towards the same common goals,” says Brent Meisinger, BLM’s Fire Operations lead in Vale, Oregon.

Partnerships Paying Dividends

This positive-trending shift in relationship couldn’t have come at a better time. In September 2015, the US Fish and Wildlife Service determined sage-grouse did not need federal ESA listing, in part based on commitments from Oregon and other western states as well as the BLM to address wildfire and its link to invasive annual grasses. This increased focus included bolstering RFPA capacity.

And, the change has not simply been a matter of culture; it has mattered on the ground. Coinciding with the more collaborative approach to federal-state-local

Acres of sagebrush habitat burned by state and year

STATE TOTALS			
STATE	2018 GRSG Acres Burned	2017 GRSG Acres Burned	2016 GRSG Acres Burned
California	22,961	88,551	5,145
Colorado	44,487	27,780	3,215
Idaho	503,875	251,443	104,849
Montana	37,259	357,934	14,316
Nevada	1,038,490	967,324	215,073
North Dakota	0	0	0
Oregon	22,291	104,905	111,760
South Dakota	0	0	0
Utah	142,765	93,295	33,269
Washington	162,828	113,217	83,489
Wyoming	124,957	69,410	55,152
TOTAL	2,099,913	2,073,859	626,268

Source: US Bureau of Land Management

relationships, something remarkable happened: last year, only 22,291 acres of sagebrush habitat burned in Oregon; a dramatic decrease compared to the million-plus acres that burned in 2012 and 2014, the 111,760 acres in 2016, and the 104,905 acres in 2017, despite the same number of fire-starts. And according to annual data released by the BLM, this was also significantly lower than the acreage burned in other sagebrush states in the same year.

Many are pointing to RFPAs as responsible for this success.

Oregon's RFPAs operate under the motto of "neighbors helping neighbors," and since the state began increasing RFA investment in the 1990s, Oregon's model has indeed caught the attention of its neighbors, including Idaho, Nevada, California, and Washington. The idea of forming volunteer forces to minimize the impacts of future fires is beginning to take hold. States are building and strengthening capacity across public and private lands, redefining community resilience.

"The incredible success of the RFPAs highlights Oregon's 'can-do' approach to complex challenges, especially in the sage," says Everett. "The example set by SageCon and the RFPAs is being implemented throughout the Great Basin."

Today, RFPAs continue to adapt, making the most of their own capacity by building upon alliances with partners such as the BLM, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Through shared investment in proactive management techniques, such as prescribed burns or increased communications capacity through radios and aerial monitoring, these partnerships are demonstrating increased relevance in successful sage-steppe wildfire management.⁵

"Rangeland fire management is complex and requires multiple actors bringing their resources to bear," says Vetter, "the numbers in 2018 show RFPAs bolstered Oregon's upper hand on fire-starts. To keep up with future fires, RFA efforts need shared investment to continue to scale up and preserve the paradise found in sagebrush country."

Funding Rangeland Fire Protection Associations

From 2015 to 2017, RFPAs received \$1.2 million in state legislative funds passed through the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board largely for communications, vehicles, water tanks and other equipment administered through the Oregon Department of Forestry.

For 2017 to 2019, RFPAs received funding to support trainings, accounting support, and insurance reimbursement to limit liabilities for volunteer firefighter programs. That funding was critical to building capacity for the 2018 fire season but atypical, as most RFPAs fundraise on their own by seeking grants and collecting member dues.

5. Rangeland Fire and Sage Brush: Strategies. Accessed February 26, 2019, <https://www.nifc.gov/fireandsagegrouse/strategy.html>