

Rural First Responders

Session Summary

Idaho Senator Bert Brackett

Rangeland fires in Idaho are becoming larger and more frequent. They are the number one threat to sage grouse habitat followed by invasive species.

Climate change, over grazing and timber harvests have increased fire incidents. Fire behavior can be controlled by fuel load management such as controlled burns and targeted grazing that creates fire strips. Planting fire resistant species in green strips also mitigates fire suppression. But, the most effective fire control is an immediate response that contains fires while they are small.

When fires strike ranchers often know the terrain best and have the quickest access to a threatened area. However, because of liability and safety concerns when "amateurs" fight fires, federal policy has recently prohibited ranchers from fighting fires on public lands.

During 2012 ranchers, the Idaho Department of Lands and the BLM formed Idaho's first Rangeland Fire Protection Association (Mountain Home RFPA). Ranchers received more than 40 hours of wildfire training and obtained liability insurance through the nonprofit organization. They also received firefighting gear, communications equipment and other resources for fighting fires.

Idaho House Bill 93 (passed in 2013) amended the Idaho code relating to forest and range fires. It adds a new section to provide for nonprofit RFPAs and procedures for their formation. The state has established a rangeland fire protection coordinator position to assist landowners in exploring their options for services.

Dave Finger, National Volunteer Fire Council

Fire and emergency medical services in rural areas is overwhelmingly provided by volunteers. Increased training and certification requirements and the scope of what fire departments are expected to do has expanded. Today medical calls are the majority of emergency responses as well as technical rescue and hazmat response. Recruitment and retention of volunteers and the purchase of new equipment and apparatus is increasingly difficult. The percentage of firefighters over the age of 50 has doubled and there aren't enough younger volunteers in the pipeline to replace them. Fundraising by rural fire departments is taking more and more of volunteers' time.

States can help local emergency service providers in three critical areas:

1. Active, well-funded fire and EMS agencies can **train and credential** volunteers on a regional basis such as community colleges, preferably on nights and weekends.
2. Providing **benefits** to volunteers improves recruitment and retention. Income tax reductions (DE, LA, MD, PA AND SC), reduced property taxes (AK, CT AND AK), retirement accounts (24 states) for volunteer emergency responders and other incentives can attract and retain personnel.
3. **Workers compensation** for volunteers ought to be job number one for state legislators.