## Appendix H: Southeast Oregon Fires

Protection of habitat for the greater sage-grouse is a top priority for wildfire response in southeastern Oregon. Both the approved resource management plan amendments for sage-grouse (sage-grouse amendments) and the 2015 Integrated Rangeland Fire Management Strategy lay out principles and management direction for reducing the impacts of wildfire on sagebrush ecosystems. Sage-grouse and several other species, such as pygmy rabbit and pronghorn antelope, in these plant communities are dependent on sagebrush for food and cover. Most sagebrush species do not resprout and often require several decades to return to useful habitat. Like northern spotted owls and marbled murrelets, sage-grouse essentially depend on a type of old-growth that requires long recovery times. The sage-grouse “old growth” is a shrub, instead of a tree.

The four eastern Oregon BLM Districts – Burns, Lakeview, Prineville, and Vale - are covered by the sage-grouse amendments and the Integrated Rangeland Fire Management Strategy. The 2016 sage-grouse amendments identified three different types of habitat areas, based on the State of Oregon’s sage-grouse management strategy. Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFAs) have the highest value for maintaining sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat and are considered the most intact and contiguous habitat remaining. Priority Habitat Management Areas (PHMA) contains the habitat used by 90 percent of sage-grouse for breeding and brood-rearing; in southern Oregon along the Nevada and Idaho borders, SFA overlaps with PHMA. General Habitat Management Areas (GHMA) largely connects the patches of PHMA. All of Oregon’s PHMA also has been designated as Priority Areas for Conservation, or PACs, with 20 PACs identified throughout southeastern Oregon. These PACs are the highest priority for wildfire protection.

However, eastern Oregon is large country with few people. There is a reason it’s also known as Oregon’s Outback. Southeastern Oregon a limited number of state and federal firefighting resources and their ability to provide rapid response to new fires is limited. To make up for this lack, BLM and Oregon Department of Forestry have been promoting the formation of Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs). These RFPAs have proven to be valuable assets in protecting sage-grouse habitat.

The RFPAs are well trained and well equipped to fight wildland fires. They receive equipment, much of it military surplus vehicles, through ODF and via grants from county, state, or federal partners. As a result, RFPAs have engines, water tenders, dozers, and lowboys for transporting heavy equipment. Grants also help the RFPAs purchase radios and personal protective equipment (PPE), such as fire shirts, hardhats, and fire shelters. Both ODF and BLM provide training and additional PPE. Members of an RFPA are able to take on all the suppression tasks, such as line construction and burnout operations, that federal and state firefighters do.

Oregon Department of Forestry provides oversight and guidance to the RFPAs, but each RFPA is an independent entity. In 2017, Oregon had 22 RFPAs located across much of eastern Oregon.

Nineteen RFPAs responded to wildfires on BLM-managed lands in 2017. Jordan Valley RFPA had the most responses, followed by Post/Paulina and Brothers/Hampton RFPAs. All told, RFPAs responded to 85 wildfires that wound up burning 96,539 acres.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| BLM District | RFPAs | Total Responses | Total Acres |
| Burns | Crane  FG  Fields/Andrews  Lone Pine  Silver Creek  Wagontire | 18 | 58,582.4 |
| Lakeview | Warner Valley | 5 | 1 |
| Prineville | Ashwood  Brothers/Hampton  Gateway  Post/Paulina  Twickenham | 38 | 5,388 |
| Vale | Blue Mountain  Burnt River  Ironside  Jordan Valley  Lookout/Glasgow  Vale | 38 | 32,568.5 |

The following three fires illustrate how wildfires affected important sage-grouse habitat as well as other resource values and the roles that local RFPAs and rural fire departments played in handling those fires.

### Ana Fire

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Date of Ignition | July 9, 2017 |
| Cause | Human |
| Land Status at Fire Origin | Private |
| Preparedness Level at Time of Ignition | National: PL 3  Regional: PL 2 |
| Fire Size | 5,874 acres |
| Estimated Cost | $2,900,000 |
| Land Jurisdictions Affected | Private, BLM, National Forest, State |
| Maximum Resources Assigned | 405 Personnel  11 Crews  32 Engines  9 Water Tenders  3 Helicopters  4 Heavy Equipment |
| Structures Destroyed | 2 |
| Cooperators | Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, Oregon Department of Forestry, Oregon Department of Transportation, Oregon State Police, Surprise Valley Electric, Summer Lake Rural, Christmas Valley Rural, Paisley Rural, Summer Lake EMS |

**July 7**

The Ana Fire in Oregon started on private land north of the town of Summer Lake and quickly spread under the influence of high winds and dry fuels. The fire threatened approximately 25 homes, 10 commercial buildings, and 10 other structures along with sage-grouse habitat in the Picture Rocks Priority Area for Conservation (PAC), Highway 31, the transmission line that roughly parallels Highway 31, and cultural resources towards the north of the fire. Several rural fire departments along with resources from the Forest Service and BLM responded to the fire.

**July 8**

Ana Fire had burned approximately 700 acres with hot, windy conditions hampering control efforts. Dense smoke on Highway 31 affected traffic safety, resulting in closure of the highway, the main route between Bend and Lakeview.

**July 9**

Lakeview District ordered a Type 2 Incident Management Team to take over managing the fire due to the threats to Summer Lake, Highway 31, private timber, and sage-grouse habitat. Ana Fire, now estimated at 3,200 acres continued to burn actively. Residents of Ana Estates and homes along Highway 31 two miles south of The Lodge were issued Level 2 evacuation notices. The national preparedness level increased to 4, indicating firefighting resource shortages developing in several geographic areas.

**July 10**

Pacific Northwest Team 12 (Harrod) assumed command of the fire mid-morning. Ana Fire was now an estimated 6,000 acres in size and had burned lands managed by Lakeview BLM and the Fremont-Winema National Forests, as well as state owned lands and private lands. An outbuilding, a barn and a hunter’s cabin were believed to be damaged or destroyed by the fire. The fire crossed Highway 31, burning from west to east. Winds were forecast to increase overnight with the main direction of spread expected to be to the north, west, and east. Parts of the fire were difficult for crews to reach, hampering control efforts, although crews made good progress on the fire otherwise.

**July 11**

Crews continued to make good progress on the fire, allowing Highway 31 to reopen with pilot cars guiding traffic through the fire area. A Level 2 evacuation order remained in place for homes along Highway 31 and Ana Estates. Team 12 met with cooperators mid-morning and with community members that evening in Summer Lake; both meetings were well attended. Better mapping reduced the estimated fire size to 5,833 acres.

**July 12**

Firefighters continued to improve the containment line on the south flank of the fire, while mopping up on the rest of the fire. Team 12 estimated the fire was now 5,874 acres and considered it 75% contained. Evacuation levels were lowered to Level 1, although smoke on Highway 31 required continued use of pilot cars for driver safety. Fremont Point Lookout was not affected; however, the Fremont-Winema National Forest closed the site through August 1 to allow unrestricted suppression and recovery traffic in the area. Fire behavior consisted mostly of smoldering under juniper trees and slow burning of interior pockets. The number of destroyed structures was reduced to two.

**July 13**

The south flank of the Ana Fire continued to hold with containment now estimated at 90%, allowing fire crews to continue to mop up and begin suppression repair. The fire area was under a Red Flag Warning, and a Fire Weather Watch issued for a Haines Index of 6 the next day. News reports quoted the Oregon State Police as suspecting tannerite (exploding targets) as the probable cause of the fire. As fire danger continued to increase and the demand for firefighting resources continued to grow, the Northwest increased its preparedness level to 3.

**July 14**

The Ana Fire was now 100% contained at an estimated 5,874 acres. Evacuation orders were lifted and normal traffic resumed on Highway 31. Team 12 planned to transfer command of the fire back to the local unit on July 15. Suppression repair was now complete on the north, east, and south sides of the fire and nearly complete on the west side. The fire burned approximately 4,136 acres in the Picture Rocks PAC, of which 3,977 acres were designated as priority habitat, and affected mule deer and elk winter range.

### Hawk Fire

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| --- | --- |
| Date of Ignition | July 27, 2017 |
| Cause | Lightning |
| Land Status at Fire Origin | Vale BLM |
| Preparedness Level at Time of Ignition | National: PL 4  Regional: PL 3 |
| Fire Size | 1,432 acres |
| Estimated Cost | $200,000 |
| Land Jurisdictions Affected | BLM |
| Maximum Resources Assigned | 56 Personnel  12 Engines  4 Water Tenders  1 Helicopters  2 Heavy Equipment |
| Structures Destroyed | 0 |
| Cooperators | Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, Jordan Valley RFPA, Malheur County |

**July 27**

Lightning started the Hawk Fire in previously unburned sagebrush within the Cow Lakes PAC, which had tripped a hard trigger due to loss of sagebrush cover and declining sage-grouse population. Jordan Valley RFPA was one of the responding units, with five Type 4 engines and three water tenders. Responding resources from BLM included one helicopter, five type 4 engines, one type 6 engine, two dozers, and one water tender while the Forest Service also sent a type 6 engine. Several airtankers supported the incident as well. The number of resources sent reflect the importance of limiting fire size in all PACs and especially those that have tripped an adaptive management trigger.

**July 28**

Hawk Fire was contained at 1,432 acres. Six BLM engines, one Forest Service engine, three RFPA engines, and the three RFPA water tenders completed lining and mop-up on the fire.

### Cinder Butte Fire

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| --- | --- |
| Date of Ignition | August 2, 2017 |
| Cause | Lightning |
| Land Status at Fire Origin | Burns BLM |
| Preparedness Level at Time of Ignition | National: PL 4  Regional: PL 3 |
| Fire Size | 52,046 acres |
| Estimated Cost | $4,474,046 |
| Land Jurisdictions Affected | BLM |
| Maximum Resources Assigned | 469 Personnel  16 Crews  27 Engines  11 Water Tenders  2 Helicopters  4 Heavy Equipment |
| Structures Destroyed | 4 |
| Cooperators | Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Oregon Department of Transportation, Harney County Sheriff, Harney County Electric, Silver Creek RFPA, Wagontire RFPA |

**August 2**

Human activity along U.S. Highway 20 near Glass Butte started the Cinder Butte fire and it spread rapidly to the south-southeast. The fire initially ran an estimated 15 miles under temperatures in excess of 100°F, single digit relative humidity, 30 mph winds, and an very unstable atmosphere (Haines Index 6) through tall grass, sagebrush, and scattered pockets of western juniper trees. Eight people were evacuated and Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) closed five miles of U.S. Highway 20, the main route between Bend and Burns. The fire also affected the 12 Mile PAC and general habitat for sage-grouse, residences, powerlines, and local livestock and was threatening the Eastern Oregon Agricultural Experiment Station and the community of Wagontire.

Responding units included Burns BLM, Prineville BLM, Malheur National Forest, Malhuer National Wildlife Refuge, Silver Creek RFPA and Wagontire RFPA. The Harney County Sheriff handled evacuations, and Harney County Electric deactivated the powerlines in the area. The initial strategy consisted of trying to keep the fire from crossing major roads and protect structures in the area.

**August 3**

Severe burning conditions continued with high temperatures, critically low relative humidity overnight and into the day, strong winds, and an unstable atmosphere. A type 2 incident management team was ordered and PNW Team 10 (Ciraulo, IC) inbriefed that evening. Additional crews arrived to help with the containment effort. Additional helicopters, single engine air tankers (SEATs), large air tankers, and the DC-10 Very Large Airtanker (VLAT) made water and retardant drops throughout the day. The fire continued to threaten the same resource values as on August 2, along with numerous archaeological sites, including Rimrock Draw, a highly significant site under study by the University of Oregon.

**August 4**

Team 10 took over management of the fire in the morning with the primary goal of continuing to construct fireline and mop-up and protecting unburned islands and archaeological sites. The fire remained quite active on the south end, including group torching in clumps of western juniper, but had moderated considerably on the north end of the fire. The team found two minor structures that had been destroyed in the initial run of the fire.

**August 5**

Fire activity eased as burning conditions moderated with the slow approach of a low pressure system. Safety concerns related to smoke, traffic, and fire fighter activity continued on U.S. Highways 20 and 395. The goal was to continue to hold the fire within its current perimeter, mop-up within 50 feet of the perimeter, and continue to protect sage-grouse habitat and archaeological sites. Team 10 reported that the RFPAs had been great partners in the suppression effort.

**August 6**

The fire was not considered 60% contained with minimal fire behavior as the weather had turned cool and cloudy. The team found an additional two minor structures destroyed for a total of four. Most work was concentrated on the south end of the fire, which had been the head of the fire. Repair of suppression-related damage began. The team and Burns District began planning for the eventual return of the fire to the District on Wednesday, August 9.

**August 7**

Now 80% contained with no significant fire behavior, the team concentrated on mop-up, repair of suppression damage, and transition planning.

**August 8**

With the fire now 90% contained, demobilization of firefighting resources began in earnest. Mop-up and suppression damage repair continued. Team 10 prepared to demobilize and return management of the fire to a District type 3 team. Warm, moist air brought in the threat of thunderstorms, high daytime temperatures, and low relative humidity.

**August 9-17**

The Type 3 team handled the remaining suppression damage repair and demobilization of firefighting resources between August 9 and 12. After that, a Type 4 incident commander managed continuing patrol of the fire through a warmer, drier, windier period to make sure of no additional flare-ups within the fire perimeter that could threaten the final containment lines. On August 17, the fire was declared 100% contained.

Along with destroying four minor structures, causing the evacuation of 8 people, damaging powerlines, disrupting traffic on U. S. Highways 20 and 395, and burning in four grazing allotments, the fire affected approximately 1,062 acres of the 12 Mile PAC (priority habitat) and 50,984 acres of general habitat for greater sage-grouse.

Over the course of the summer six wildfires in Oregon burned in priority habitat for sage-grouse (Folly Farms, Picture Rock, Cow Lakes, Louse Canyon, and 12 Mile PACs) and nine fires affected general habitat. Louse Canyon PAC is also designated as Sagebrush Focal Area (SFA), which is considered the highest quality sage-grouse habitat. All told, wildfires impacted 1,575 acres of SFA, 8,311 acres of priority habitat, and 80,562 acres of general habitat. Greater sage-grouse are considered an umbrella species for many other sagebrush obligate species, such as pygmy rabbit, pronghorn antelope, and several species of birds and reptiles. Loss of sage-grouse habitat affects habitat availability for these other sagebrush obligate species as well.

A number of grazing permittees were also affected as the fires this summer burned an estimated 121 miles of fence, and impacted 31 allotments and 40 grazing permittees. The fires will result in temporary reductions of 5,217 animal unit months (the amount of forage needed by a cow-calf pair over one month) in Oregon.