

WC Ranches RFPA

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March 21, 2025

Hon. Thuy Tran, Chair
House Committee on Emergency Management,
General Government, and Veterans
Oregon Legislative Assembly

RE: House Bills 3349 and 3350

Dear Chairwoman Tran, Members of the Committee,

I am writing this in support of House Bills 3349 and 3350 on behalf of WC Ranches Rangeland Fire Protection Association, a nonprofit association comprised of cattle ranchers and landowners in Wheeler County.

I am a founding member of WC Ranches RFPA and am presently a board member, secretary and treasurer of WC Ranches.

I will be presenting a brief overview of the Lone Rock Fire of 2024 to your committee on March 25, 2025. I was asked to tell the story for WC Ranches. So listed below is a longer version of WC Ranches RFPA's story in lieu of my 2 minute presentation to the committee.

WC Ranches Rangeland Fire Protection Association: A Story of "Neighbors Helping Neighbors"

Introduction

- WC Ranches Rangeland Fire Protection Association (RFPA) was established in 2015 to protect the community. In these past nine years WC Ranches have fought numerous fires within our boundaries and have assisted with mutual aid fires within Wheeler County
- WC Ranches is made up of 31 volunteers with 8 pieces of RFPA and 17 pieces of member owned firefighting equipment
- Some members of our RFPA were previously part of Wheeler Point Volunteer Fire Association, which fought both wildfires and structure fires.
- Some of our members have worked for ODF in the past.
- Between membership dues, grants and insurance reimbursement, we operate on \$19,000 per year

2016: A Lesson in Self-Reliance

- Our first year in service – A wildfire broke out on one of our members properties in an ODF protection zone. WC Ranches RFPA was first on the scene.
- Two men from ODF arrived in a brush fire engine that they were unfamiliar with and stated they were not wearing proper boots and therefore would not fight fire.
- Instead of assisting, they measured the fire's boundary and said they would return in the morning and for us to leave the fire. It was requested of them to leave us the water from their truck and they did not.
- WC Ranches RFPA continued fighting the fire ourselves, with two of our volunteers staying overnight.
- The next morning a fire crew of eight arrived around 9 AM with a tender and two pickups but simply monitored the burned area from their vehicles in lieu of doing mop up. The same crew arrived again the next morning continuing what they did the day before.
- Our takeaway? Since this time the cooperation between ODF Fossil unit and WC Ranches has changed and we now have an excellent working relationship. Our volunteers are trained, prepared, and capable of handling wildfires in our region and appreciate any help we receive from other agencies.

2020: Experience vs Bureaucracy

- Lightning strike fire within Wheeler County Fire & Rescue boundaries quickly moved within WC Ranches RFPA boundaries.
- BLM helicopter dropped two men – one introduces himself saying he is the Incident Commander (IC) and has already ordered retardant planes
- He understood how important local knowledge is and offers the IC role to me. I told him our fire chief would be arriving shortly and the two of them could decide.
- With the help of the two BLM gentlemen, volunteers from both WC Ranches RFPA and Wheeler County Fire & Rescue RFPA along with the retardant planes the fire was put out.
- The reality? While paid firefighters are funded by the government agencies, our volunteers use out of pocket dollars for fuel and our firefighting equipment which have been built with volunteer hours and grant dollars.
- House Bills 3349 and 3350 would help support the financial burden on the RFPA volunteers.

2024: Lone Rock Fire - How WC Ranches RFPA Stepped UP

- WC Ranches RFPA responded to 9 fires in 2024, including the 137,000 acres Lone Rock Fire.
- WC Ranches RFPA initially responded as mutual aid, saving multiple homes, barns and structures.
- Our back burn request was denied by the interagency fire team, so we took action ourselves within our boundaries. As a general rule, back burns in the John Dave Valley are not initiated until after the sundowner winds have subsided (usually after 9 PM)
- WC Ranches RFPA completed a successful back burn
- The next night, another strategic back burn with our experienced volunteers saved nine rural homes and the town of Spray.
- Our expertise prevented further disaster

The Cost of Volunteerism vs Paid Crew

- Volunteers hours – 4,068 Lone Rock Fire alone
- Equipment - 37 pieces (Both personal & WC Ranches)

- Fuel Cost – was approximately \$12,728 Lone Rock Fire alone
- What would it cost government agencies to accomplish what WC Ranches RFPAs did on this fire?
- Additional support given by WC Ranches RFPAs volunteers
 - Two members, whose ranches sit along the main highway, provided fuel to multiple other firefighting vehicles -- without charge

RFPAs – Equipment & Maintenance Challenges

- Grant funding is not always available to maintain existing equipment or acquire additional equipment.
- We are unable to do long term planning (5 year plus) because we do not have a reliable source of funding available.
- Our RFPAs could provide even more assistance on these fires and work safer and more effectively with additional state excess equipment and funding.

Conclusion: Why RFPAs Matter

- WC Ranches RFPAs and all other RFPAs in the state of Oregon are built on the principle of “Neighbors Helping Neighbors”
- Our volunteers know the lay of the terrain, understand wildfire behavior, the local weather patterns and with strategic location of equipment are prepared to act immediately.
- RFPAs main success is quick response to the location of a fire and putting it out before it has a chance to expand.
- Time and again, we have demonstrated the expertise, dedication and effectiveness of local fire response.
- What would it cost government agencies if the RFPAs were non existents?
- Investing in RFPAs means protecting our communities efficiently and cost-effectively. The RFPAs need House Bills 3349 and 3350

As two of our colleagues John O’Keeffe, President of Warner Valley RFPAs and Mike Fox, Secretary of Frenchglen RFPAs have written in support House Bills 3349 and 3350, we of WC Ranches RFPAs could not have written it more perfectly to capture the needs of RFPAs throughout the state of Oregon.

WC Ranches RFPAs highly recommends the Committee to support House Bills 3349 and 3350 as well as recommending the bills to the full Legislative Assembly for passage.

Respectfully,



Elizabeth Parke, Board of Director/Secretary/Treasurer
WC Ranches Rangeland Fire Protection Association