

Ironside RFPA, Malheur County

Today I would like to share a little insight of the July fire season in the Ironside district out of the perspective of a Ironside RFPA member, Farmer, Rancher and neighbor to many.

Being alert and aware of the fire danger is just a normal thing as you check the weather every day, if you live in Eastern Oregon starting from May till the end of August. We were aware of several fires within Malheur County early in the season, but with no bad weather in the forecast, we were all a little surprised when we got the phone call in the early morning hours on July 11th, 2024. That day a major fire season started for us in Malheur County, with mostly privately owned land, as we found out we dealt with 5 fires within the Ironside RFPA. Phone calls were made, local ranchers mobilized, and the first attacks began within a few hours of each start of the fire.

The fires were in different locations, with a great amount of distance between each fire and all of us locals became extra busy, since most of us were in the middle of irrigation and haying season.

We have our very large district divided up into smaller districts, and each assigned fire director with the landowners went to work with all they had available and called in neighbors with whatever they had to help suppress and put the fires out. The fire in the Brogan Canyon got put out by our local ranchers with the help of what equipment they owned privately.

The Bonita fire's first attack was all with resources that the ranchers provided, besides a tanker supplied from the local Road district to fill up water tanks, to not waste so much time traveling long distances and assistance of other agencies later on.

The Cow Valley Fire, soon became our first Mega fire in the nation for the year. For the initial attack we used our 1078 military truck to put out what the local ranchers could, brought in their own dozer along with more back up, including pickups and water trucks coming from our neighboring district and the help of other agencies with resources spread thin everywhere being divided up between all the fires and because of the lay of the land and fire behavior, at times there was no way to even go on the highway to check on the different members fighting the fire.

A few days later, due to a thunderstorm we had another Maga Fire start up in our neighboring district, called the Durkee Fire, that spread over onto our district and merged with our Cow Valley Fire.

A few days after that, we had another thunderstorm start up another fire, by burning down a power pole, which was spotted by a local and again Ironside RFPA mobilized all they had and got it put out within hours.

Now you have an idea on what we dealt with over several weeks without a break in between, I would like to point out that in the entire Ironside community we have a population of under 50 and not all of them reside full time and the majority are seniors.

Our Ironside RFPA'S resources are very little to fight fire with, due to a lack of funding.

As a district we have one 1078 Military truck and about 8 slip-in tanks for pickup trucks.

We as the few ranchers and RFPA members had a span of over 2 weeks of intense firefighting, taking care of our livestock and moving cows from pasture to pasture, often times having to move the same cattle 3 times, making a living irrigating our crops and putting up hay with little sleep and always being on call no matter the time of day or night it was. Running supplies, keeping everybody informed, dealing with the smoke and the power outages, which is an entirely new subject. Speaking of power, we would like to say another Thank YOU to Idaho Power for all they did and keeping us on the grid as well as they could. If you have been to our area, you know we live in a high mountain desert with temperatures reaching over 100 degrees in the day, where water is very valuable to us. Without power we cannot run our wells to irrigate, supply water for our livestock and fill up our water tanks to fight fire.

The resources to run and move all the equipment, RFPA owned or privately, were mostly supplied by local ranchers. Resources like fuel, water, batteries, drinks or food and the miles we put on our private vehicles, not to mention the toll they took by driving on all the off roads.

I would like to leave you all with this, imagine you work a full-time job and everything you own is on the line of being destroyed by fire, you do whatever it takes to protect and fight what is trying to destroy you. Rest or sleep is not a priority, and the stress level is at an all-time high, because of limited resources and manpower. You would give it your all, and that is what we did and do again. In the end, not everything got protected, much of our feed got burned up, some livestock lost and the real story for some of us just begun. Trying to figure out how to feed our livestock, dealing with their stress and keeping them healthy through the summer and winter. Replacing and repairing fences, corrals and so on, while looking at all the burn scars in front of us. The next thing will be winter and snow run off..., will there be wash outs? How much grass will there be to graze in the spring? Will I be able to get back onto my pasture?

The end of the fire season didn't stop for us with the end of the fire. We are still in it, already getting ready for the next season.

What we need is better and more equipment for our local RFPAs to fight the fire to respond even quicker. Equipment that is designated and ready to go, and not only rely on what our local ranchers own and provide. The funding available to us at this time, is not adequate.

We thank you for your time today and please thank a farmer or rancher today for all they do.

Sincerely from a

RFPA Member, Farmer and Rancher