

AGENCIES STEP UP TO HELP RANCHERS & LANDOWNERS IMPACTED BY WILDFIRES

By Steve Stuebner

Conditions were hot and dry in the last week of July, and two of Idaho's largest and most destructive wildfires of Summer 2018 occurred during that time. The Sharps fire was ignited by a man shooting at an exploding target east of Bellevue, and the Grassy Ridge fire was ignited by lightning. Both fires took off quickly and burned over a mix of private, state and federal lands.

The Sharps Fire burned to the east of Bellevue toward Carey, and came very close to the Flat Top Ranch owned by John and Diane Josephy Peavey. It threatened other ranches in the area. The Peaveys are well-known for their role in founding and participating in the nationally famous "Trailing of the Sheep Festival" to be held Oct. 10-14 in Ketchum.

"We were lucky," said John Peavey. "We were able to get our cows and our sheep out of there just in the nick of time before the fire came through. Diane and I were up there on the second morning of the fire, and we were able to push about 100 cows down to some beaver ponds with the pickup and on foot. The fire burned the area where the cows had been the next day."

Lightning ignited the Grassy Ridge fire on July 26 northwest of St. Anthony,



A rancher watched anxiously from the roof of his stock trailer near Idaho Falls as the Grassy Ridge Fire loomed large on the horizon..

and it burned toward the St. Anthony Dunes as well as some thick and tall sagebrush near DuBois – some of the best sage grouse habitat in the state – and an area used for livestock grazing.

Terreton cattle rancher Lynn Burtenshaw was there on the first day of the fire to rescue his cattle, but the local fire boss told him that they had the fire under control, and it was burning in the opposite direction, he said.

"I got a call from them an hour later and the wind had changed, and it was burning right into the direction where my cattle were grazing on some deeded ground," Burtenshaw said. "It ran right down through us; the cattle never had a chance."

The sagebrush was so thick and tall that the flames were burning 50-100 feet high, he said. There was no way to get out in front of it, he said.

Burtenshaw had 350 cattle grazing in the area at the time. He lost about 65 head to the fire. He also had about 25

miles of fencing burn up, he said.

Frank Vandersloot, CEO of Melaleuca, said he lost 12 cows, 7 calves and a bull to the Grassy Ridge Fire.

"We got hit pretty hard," Vandersloot said. "We also lost about 15,000 acres of range."

Burtenshaw and Vandersloot were one of about 14 permittees affected by the 99,500-acre Grassy Ridge Fire. The Camas Creek Rangeland Fire Protection Association played a key role in stopping the fire from doing more damage, officials said. And the Clark Soil and Water Conservation District did a great job helping landowners understand what resources would be available to them to restore lands after the fire, said Richard Savage, a Clark County rancher and chairman of the Camas Creek RFPA.

"That was only the second fire we had responded to since we formed three years ago," Savage said. "That was a big fire with lots of people on

it. It's hard to know how much good you're doing with a big fire like that, but with our knowledge of the country and knowing where the resources are, I was real proud of how our guys responded. We also were really grateful to the assistance we got from the BLM. They were fantastic to work with."

Robbie Taylor and the Clark SWCD secured and paid for the meeting venue and Tracie O'Neill with NRCS put a valuable meeting together for landowners following the fire. "They got all of the agencies together, and I think everyone was really thankful for that," Savage said.

The Sharps Fire burned a total of about 65,000 acres. About 20-25 landowners were affected across eight

grazing allotments, officials with the BLM said.

Now, in early October, the fires are out, the smoke has cleared. More than 520,000 acres burned across all ownerships in Idaho. State and federal agencies and landowners are taking stock of the damage. Multiple agencies are working on finding resources available for new range for livestock, rebuilding exterior and interior fencing, re-seeding burned lands and applying for compensation for lost property and livestock.

One thing that's new this year is that state and federal agencies are taking an "All Hands, All Lands" approach to fire rehabilitation projects, such as aerial seeding efforts that cross agency boundaries in the burn zone.

"We are taking an All Hands, All Lands approach to the seeding efforts," said Joanna Tjaden, a range specialist for the BLM in Shoshone. "We're also looking at the Good Neighbor initiative to see if there are any opportunities in that program."

Long-time landowners may know which agencies can help them with what resources that may be needed, but newer landowners need help understanding which agencies provide assistance for particular needs, officials said.

"Some of the newer landowners may not know where to reach out" because there are quite a few state and federal agencies that provide services, and the landowners might not have much experience dealing with the agencies, said Charles Sandford, a wildlife biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service based in Twin Falls.

"We're glad to help people figure that out," Sandford says. "We like to do a field visit and talk to them one-on-one about what they'd like to do... we ask questions, what are your goals for your property? Are there any improvements that you want to do? What's your budget? etc."

Overall, Sandford says doing some restoration and rehabilitation on private lands after a fire can turn into an opportunity, particularly for rangeland health. "Sometimes it is an awesome opportunity to reset the clock and get more of the desired vegetation to come in after a fire. A blank slate can be a good thing. We try to steer folks toward a nice balance of doing things for wildlife and livestock grazing."

The NRCS recently announced an early sign-up deadline of Nov. 16 for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) projects related to Disaster Relief Funding, including the Grassland Reserve Program, Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program or Agricultural Land Easement Program

Resources available for landowners

Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission (ISWCC): The Commission's low-interest loan program funds: Rebuilding fence and watering systems, replanting perennial grass species, shrubs and trees, or planting quick-growing annual grass species for erosion-control work. Contact Terry Hoebelheinrich terry.hoebelheinrich@swc.idaho.gov or 208-332-1793 to apply.

Farm Service Agency (FSA): Contact your local FSA office to apply for funds for: exterior fencing, loss of livestock, range restoration, restoring water lines and irrigation systems, and emergency water supplies. FSA also may be able to help with obtaining permission to grazing CRP lands.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS): Contact your local NRCS office to apply for cost-share assistance for: Interior fencing, cross-fencing, water developments, seeding and vegetation planting.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM): Contact your local BLM office to see if they can provide surplus rangeland resources for ranchers who have been burned out of their existing grazing allotment(s). The BLM has one forage reserve in the Burley area, and there is a second forage reserve under development in the Big Desert Sheep Allotment about 20 miles north of American Falls. Any landowners who are interested should contact the BLM office in Burley 208-677-6600, or Idaho Falls, 208-524-7500.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS): Contact the FWS if you would like assistance with enhancing fish and wildlife habitat on private lands. Professional wildlife biologists who are ready to assist landowners are: Matt Bringhurst in Pocatello, 208-241-1833; Charles Sandford in Twin Falls, 208-736-2387, and Josh White in Boise, 208-378-5265.

easements that need repairs, officials said.

“Agricultural producers are always very resilient and known for rising to any challenge,” said Curtis Elke, NRCS State Conservationist for Idaho. “Recognizing that challenges are opportunities to make things better, this early sign-up period is going to enable us to help Idaho’s farmers, ranchers and private timber producers implement useful conservation practices. This will, in turn, allow them to be more prepared in the face of natural disasters, rising energy costs, and increasing variability in weather conditions.”

Finding alternative range for livestock

For ranchers who graze on public lands allotments that have been affected by wildfires, it often takes two years before state or federal agencies allow them to graze on those lands again to give rangelands time to heal after soil-rehabilitation work, drill-seedings and aerial seedings occur. So finding alternative range for livestock is very high priority, but often very challenging.

Burtenshaw was hoping that he could



Crews battle the Sharps Fire

graze his cattle on nearby Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands. The Farm Service Agency (FSA) provides the authority to graze CRP lands, which normally are not available for livestock grazing. But the rancher said he could only get permission to graze through the end of September on CRP ground, he needs range through October this fall, and he’ll need range next spring.

If he can’t get alternative range, he will have to sell off his herd, he said. “I can’t afford to feed them hay for the next two years,” he noted.

Vandersloot said he has made some of his private range available to a fellow rancher in the Upper Valley, and he encourages others to help out those in need. “We’ve made some of our range available at the Sheridan Ranch,” he said. “The operator we helped out needed a place to graze 500 head of cattle. We are not charging him. He was completely out of places to graze his livestock.”

Vandersloot encouraged other ranchers to help out those in need. “We’re just trying to be good neighbors,” he said. “Fortunately, we had a good grass year, and we had some to share. My dad always taught me that when your neighbors need help, you help them. Don’t charge them.”

The BLM has a new 5,000-acre grassland reserve in the Big Desert Sheep Allotment, north of American Falls, that will be ready for use next spring. The reserve was created by the BLM to serve cattle or sheep ranchers who may have no where to graze livestock after a devastating wildfire, officials said. The reserve will be available to cattle or sheep ranchers from the Upper Snake River Valley. Landowners who might be interested should apply to the Idaho Falls BLM.

In the Burley area, the BLM has an existing 5,900-acre grassland reserve in the Dale Pierce Grazing Allotment. About 1,200 animal unit months are available in that reserve. It’s open to cattle or sheep ranchers who have been burned out by wildfires, BLM officials said.

Fencing, seeding and more Landowners can apply to the local Farm Service Agency (FSA) office if they’re looking to replace exterior fencing on private land.

For interior fencing and cross-fencing



Sharps Fire.

on private lands, NRCS can cost-share those resources through the EQIP program. Contact your local NRCS office for more information.

The Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission has a low-interest loan program that can be used as a landowner’s share to match federal funds, or to cover all the costs of rebuilding fence and watering systems, replanting perennial grass species, shrubs and trees, or annual quick-growing grass species for erosion-control work, officials said.

So far, landowners have expressed interest in replacing interior fencing, seeding preferred native vegetation in areas where noxious weeds have taken over, and ensuring that riparian vegetation has taken root to prevent flooding or soil erosion after next winter and spring, NRCS officials said.

In the Sharps Fire zone, NRCS is focusing on re-seeding preferred native vegetation on the hotter south slopes where noxious weeds and cheatgrass have been an issue, officials said. “We’re recommending they work with Blaine County Weed control and NRCS for these kinds of projects,” said Daniel Ramono, soil conservationist for NRCS in Shoshone.

In the Grassy Ridge fire zone, the Idaho Department of Lands is working together with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game and the BLM to do aerial seeding of sagebrush and grass species to restore state and federal lands from the fire, officials said.

“The goal is to do aerial seeding on



Grassy Ridge Fire

a portion of the fire before the snow comes,” said Chad Taylor, a range specialist for IDL. “We’re taking an All Hands, All Lands approach to the seeding, but we’re struggling to find seed suppliers right now because of all the fires we’ve had this summer, not only in Idaho but in the West.”

The All Hands, All Lands approach will allow purchasing the seed under one contract for all three ownerships, he said.

IDL may allow ranchers to return to the burn zone after one growing season, depending on how the seedings take root, Taylor said. “If we confirm that the seeding has taken hold in 75 percent of the area, we could allow some grazing in the second half of the second growing season,” he said.

Grazing permittees won’t be charged any grazing fees when their allotments are closed to grazing, officials said.

The Sharps Fire and Grassy Ridge Fire occurred in higher-elevation areas that typically have better natural regeneration of plants and sagebrush than low-elevation areas. As a result, BLM officials said they are hoping that Mother Nature helps restore lands

better and faster than using man-assisted treatments.

Wildlife enhancement Some landowners may not be aware that fish- and wildlife enhancement funds are available from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) through its Partners in Fish and Wildlife program and other programs.

The FWS in Idaho has hired three wildlife biologists to do outreach with private landowners to increase enrollment in those programs to benefit fish and wildlife habitat, notes Jason Pyron, Sage-Grouse Coordinator and Conservation Partnerships leader for the FWS in Boise.

Wildlife biologists are based in Twin Falls to work on the Sharps Fire, Idaho Falls to work on the Grassy Ridge fire, and Boise to work on any other fires in the state, Pyron said.

“Through the Partners in Fish and Wildlife program, we are directed to spend funds to assist private landowners and tribal landowners with installing improvements on the ground and providing technical assistance,” Pyron said. “A lot of people don’t realize that these programs are available to assist landowners after wildfires as well as projects that may not be related to fires.”

The Partners in Fish and Wildlife program seeks to enhance habitat for species that might be listed under the Endangered Species Act such as Chinook salmon, steelhead and bull trout, or candidate species such as



Grassy Ridge Fire

sage grouse.

Please see the sidebar on pg. 2 for contact information for various agencies to inquire about assistance and application forms. □

Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.

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