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The Camas Creek RFPA had to fight the 99,000-acre Grassy Ridge range fire in 2018, only two years after it formed. (Photo courtesy Camas Creek RFPA)

CAMAS CREEK RFPA HELPS STOP RANGE FIRES IN REMOTE CORNER OF IDAHO

By Steve Stuebner

Idaho cattle rancher Richard Savage hails from the least-populated corner of Idaho, Clark County, which has been holding steady with about 790 people county-wide, according to the 2020 census.

Yet, the county is BIG – it covers 1,765 square miles, located next to the Montana border in Eastern Idaho, adjacent to Fremont County and Yellowstone National Park. The majority of the county land use type is rangeland and ranching, with many acres of land occupied by cattle, sage grouse and other types of wildlife.

Savage stays active in his community, serving on the Clark

Soil Conservation District Board of Supervisors, and he's also a leader and founder of the Camas Creek Rangeland Fire Protection Association (RFPA).

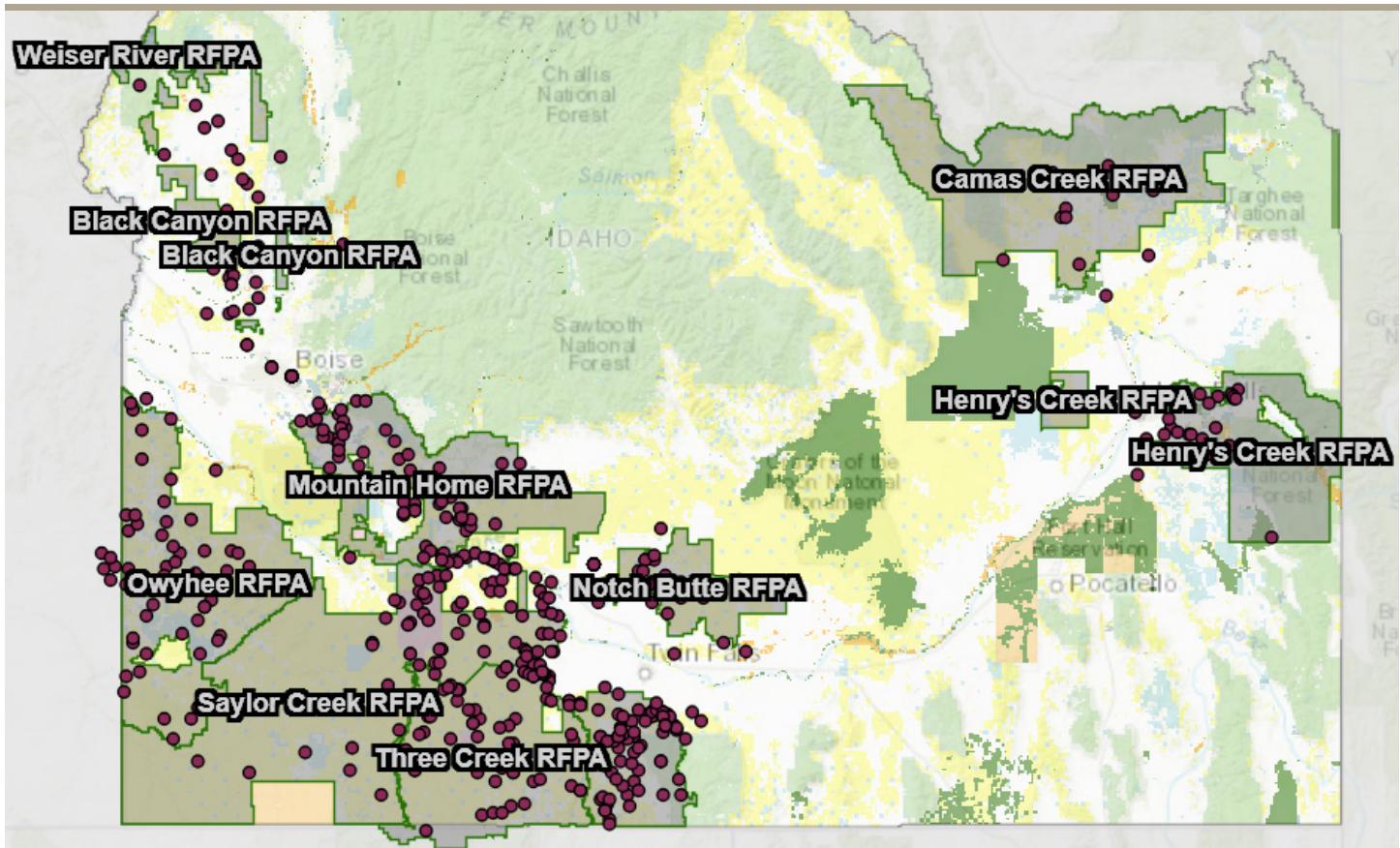
Savage recently gave a presentation to the Division 6 meeting of the Idaho Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts about the value of RFPA's in general and the Camas Creek RFPA in particular.

"As part the Division 6 meeting, each conservation district was asked to highlight three things they're doing in three minutes," said George Hitz, Deputy Admin. of the Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission. "Clark Soil Conservation District hosted

that meeting, and they were asked to do a more in-depth presentation on something important in their district activities, and they chose the RFPA."

There are now 10 RFPA's in the State of Idaho since the first one was created by Mountain Home ranchers in 2012. RFPA's protect a combined 9.3 million acres of private, state and federal rangeland in Idaho from catastrophic wildfire – a landscape larger than the state of New Jersey, according to the Idaho Department of Lands (IDL). The areas include 1.9 million acres of private rangeland and 7.4 million acres of federal and state land. (see map on page 2)

In a 10-year anniversary story about



Map shows the location of the 10 Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) currently operating in Southern Idaho, including the Camas Creek RFPA in Eastern Idaho. Red dots on the map indicate the location of wildfires in or near RFPA boundaries. (Courtesy Idaho Department of Lands)

RFPA's for the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission's Life on the Range series, ranchers, land managers and firefighting experts all agreed that RFPA's across Southern Idaho have been a "game-changer" in speeding up the initial attack when wildfires occur and stopping them from growing into huge destructive blazes that might burn 100,000-300,000 acres for weeks on end.

That's been true for Savage and Clark County partners involved in the Camas Creek RFPA, and it's been true across Southern Idaho where RFPA's are in place.

Reducing the size of rangeland wildfires was a major motivating force in leading Mountain Home ranchers to form the first RFPA. The idea was to allow ranchers to work together with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) - and



Richard Savage, left, checks out a cover crop in a Clark County farm field. (file photo)

sometimes rural fire departments or state fire crews - to squelch wildfires quickly when they're small.

Prior to the creation of the Mountain Home RFPA in Idaho,

it was illegal for ranchers or rural citizens to help the BLM with fighting a range fire. That created some tense situations, with tempers flaring and high-quality shrub and grasslands getting torched.

"We had a fire, a lightning strike that started a fire over by the Blair

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Acquiring firefighting equipment is a big deal for RFPAAs as they often have to apply for grants to find funding to purchase fire engines, water trucks and heavy equipment. Many ranchers have dozers at the ranch. (Courtesy Camas Creek RFPA)

Trail Reservoir," said Wes Wootan, a Glenns Ferry farmer and Elmore County commissioner, told *Life on the Range*. "Two ranchers had it controlled and shut down until the BLM could get there."

When the BLM fire crew showed up, the ranchers "were asked to leave, they did, and that fire - potentially a 5-15 acre fire - grew to a 40,000-acre fire," Wooten said.

Wooten and local ranchers felt the BLM policy was unacceptable.

"We do make a living off this land," says Charlie Lyons, Mountain Home rancher. "It's important to us to protect the resource the best we can."

Using a private-public partnership model developed in Oregon, the IDL and BLM officials helped the Mountain Home ranchers form Idaho's first Rangeland Fire Protection Association. State legislation was passed to codify the agreements with the state and BLM.

Savage reflects on the importance of that deal coming together. "Thank goodness we had people on the

federal side who were open-minded enough to step up and work with us ranchers on that deal. There's a lot of liability on a fire, but we were able to work those things out."

The Camas Creek RFPA formed in 2016. Savage paired up with Phil Simpson, a business manager for Taylor Farms, to form the organization. Simpson crafted the legal paperwork to create a non-profit organization for the Camas Creek RFPA.

"We made a good team," Savage says. "We wanted to create something that would last for years to come, something that people would believe in."

Today, the Camas Creek RFPA has 50 people involved, ranging from ranchers, Clark County road and bridge personnel, the Clark County rural fire department, landowners, interested citizens, the Dubois Sheep Experiment Station, the BLM, IDL and the Forest Service.

"Everybody is trained; everybody's got a Red Card," he notes. In

firefighting, a Red Card (officially known as an Incident Qualification Card) is a, pocket-sized, annually renewed, document that certifies a wildland firefighter has met the minimum training, experience, and physical fitness standards required to safely work on a wildfire or prescribed fire. It is essentially a "driver's license" for wildland firefighters, allowing them to be recognized and deployed across different agencies and jurisdictions.

"Everybody is trained in the use of heavy equipment and fire engines as well," Savage said.

Many of the RFPAAs created across Southern Idaho were organized after a disastrous range fire. But the Camas Creek RFPA had 1.5 years of experience before the "Grassy Ridge" wildfire was ignited by lightning in July 2018, 15 miles northwest of St. Anthony.

The blaze took off big-time in heavy brush and consumed a total of 99,502 acres. It required the evacuation of Dubois, the largest town in Clark County, and



BLM firefighter initiates a back burn with a drip torch during the Grassy Ridge wildfire in 2018. (Courtesy Camas Creek RFPA)

it threatened the small town of Spencer.

"Grassy Ridge was the big one, that was our first real test for the RFPA," Savage said. "We had an amazing amount of help from rural fire departments and law enforcement – I couldn't believe all of the agencies that rallied to help us with that Grassy Ridge fire. It's all about strength in numbers and partnerships to take care of the resource, especially in a small county like ours."

Plus, it's about personal relationships that have formed from everyone working together on the RFPA. Savage recalls meeting with some BLM fire bosses at midnight during the peak of the Grassy Ridge fire.

"I wanted them to put a dozer line around the perimeter of that fire," he says. "I was worried about the Dubois sheep station, you know, they've got a lot of research projects going on out there. We don't want that habitat burned up."

"And these guys drive up to me, and

you could see their beards were singed from being so close to the fire. Their faces were like the color of charcoal. Clearly, they were really tired, but I told them about my concern and hoped that maybe something could be done.

"The next morning, I'm driving around in my pickup at 5 in the morning, looking around at the burn, and I ran into those BLM guys again, and they had just finishing putting in the dozer line across the north end of that fire. Without the relationship I had with them from the RFPA, they wouldn't have done that. It's really all about the cooperation that makes things work."

Since the Grassy Ridge fire, the Camas Creek RFPA has been able to keep range fires pretty small most of the time, Savage says.

"It's a wonderful deal, the RFPA," says Steve Gilger, a Camas Creek RFPA member. "The local knowledge that landowners have out there is crucial when we have a range fire. The BLM Incident Command team might be from out of state, so they don't know the country. We can tell them

where the water resources are, and all about the landscape and topography in our local area."

The cooperation between local residents, rural fire departments, the BLM, IDL and the Forest Service on the RFPA works really well, Gilger says. "It's one of those things that actually works the way it's supposed to. Everybody sees it as a positive. I'm really happy to be part of it."

Gilger is an EMT. He's worked on the county ambulance crew, and he's worked for the Idaho Transportation Department, plowing snow. So he knows how to run heavy equipment. Like some other RFPA's, the Camas Creek RFPA has fire engines and firefighting equipment pre-positioned in strategic areas, often times on a rancher's property in a remote area.

"You need to be ready when a wildfire breaks out," Gilger notes. "You need to make sure your equipment is all fueled up and in good working order, ready to go."



Camas Creek RFPA firefighter douses the edges of a range fire near Dubois in 2018. (Courtesy Camas Creek RFPA)

The BLM or IDL leads annual winter training sessions to make sure everyone is current on their training requirements.

"I feel serving on the RFPA is one of the most productive services I've done in my life," Gilger said.

There might be some gaps remaining in Southern Idaho where an RFPA could be organized, if locals are motivated to do so, officials said.

"We do have some areas in Southeast Idaho that fall into a kind of "no man's land" when it comes to fire protection," said Alex Cox, Southern Idaho Fire Program Liaison for IDL.

Those areas would have BLM fire

protection, but they lie outside of rural fire district zones, he said.

Private and public rangelands in the southeast corner of Idaho, from Pocatello south to the Utah border is one area, Cox said, and another lies between Twin Falls and Pocatello.

That was the purpose of Savage's presentation about RFPA's at the Division 6 meeting, so other conservation districts with a mix of rangelands, private ranchland, state lands and BLM lands could consider the benefits.

"I think the RFPA's are very beneficial," said Colby Ward, a Camas Creek RFPA member and local farmer. "We help keep the fires smaller before the BLM can arrive."

"The Grassy Ridge fire is one where we literally got thrown into the fire, working together to keep that fire from spreading more than it did," Ward says. "We saved a house, my brothers and I, and RFPA partners, during that fire. The RFPA has been beneficial for sure."

For more information on forming an RFPA, contact Alex Cox at IDL, acox@idl.idaho.gov; (208) 334-0263.

For more information about the Camas Creek RFPA, contact Conn Owen, camascreekrfpa@gmail.com.

Go to <http://idrange.org/life-on-the-range/> to view the RFPA videos.

Steve Stuebner is a regular contributor to Conservation the Idaho Way.

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