



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

Montana

July 2012



Preparing for Wildfire on Montana Rangelands

A Landowner's Guide

Of the more than 93 million acres that comprise Montana, more than 38 million are agricultural lands used for range and pasture. Montana's livestock industry, which contributed \$1.2 billion in cash receipts to the state's economy in 2010 (Montana Agricultural Statistics), depends heavily on this abundant natural resource. As managers of these precious lands, you realize the importance of rangelands to our economy, quality of life, and the ecological health of Montana.

Wildfire can be a serious threat to the viability of livestock operations that are dependent on Montana's grazingland resources. According to Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation figures, there have been an average of 1,622 fires per year, affecting 3.2 million acres in the last ten years.

Communication

The first step in being prepared for the fire season is communication. Having an open conversation about current mitigation strategies, resources available, and response plans will go a long way toward facilitating effective wildfire control activities. How can you communicate with all of the stakeholders?

- Attend public meetings
- Make phone calls
- Visit agency offices
- Ask questions at local gatherings (at the coffee shop, sports events, etc.)
- Basically...actively seek information

Talk to your neighbors about what they are doing now to prepare for the fire season and how they might be able to respond to fire reports in the area. There may be things you can do together to prevent the spread of fire, like strategically planning the location of fire breaks before a fire breaks out. Adjacent landowners are often the first responders to a fire. Be sure to gather and distribute a list of home and cell phone numbers for emergencies. If radios are used, notify everyone of a common channel that can be used for general conversation and emergency announcements. Private conversations can be held on other channels.

When organizing with neighboring landowners, these three steps and basic sample questions may help to guide the discussion.

- Identify potential fire hazards.
 - Where are large tracts of overgrown, decadent vegetation located?
 - Are there areas of rangeland that abut forest lands with a high fuel load?
 - What areas are most susceptible or vulnerable to fire and need to be protected?
- List local resources.
 - Which neighbors have heavy equipment?
 - Does anyone have a vehicle with a water tank and pumping capabilities?

What can you do to protect the rangelands that you manage from wildfire? Preparation is the key to containment and suppression.

- Dialing 911 reaches the local fire department, but who are the emergency contacts for land management agencies that may be threatened?
- Can someone volunteer to be a point of contact for communication among neighbors, sort of like a local dispatcher?
- Develop an action plan.
 - What tasks need to be done?
 - Who will be responsible for those tasks?
 - What resources will be utilized?
 - Reassess seasonally. Hazards, resources, and other circumstances may change so that the action plan needs to be updated.

If your land borders public lands, be sure to talk to the managing agency about their wildfire strategies. Hearsay is often the means of gathering information about state and federal agencies. Don't rely on it. Get the facts from the source. Be sure to ask about hazardous fuels mitigation activities taking place on public lands and how this might affect your property. Get specific details about fire suppression policy and response procedures. This applies to lessees also.

Find out what resources the local/rural fire department has to offer. Local fire departments have experience fighting rangeland wildfires and may have suggestions for wildfire preparedness specific to your area. In addition, the responsibility for fire suppression on private lands is primarily handled by local volunteer fire departments, which provide about 80 percent of initial wildfire attack in the United States according to the Bureau of Land Management. Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service fire fighting resources in Montana often assist with initial wildfire attack and complement sustained fire fighting on public and private rangelands in Montana, but local volunteer fire departments are the greatest resource for private landowners working to reduce fire threats on their property.

...the responsibility for fire suppression on private lands is primarily handled by local volunteer fire departments, which provide about 80 percent of initial wildfire attack in the United States according to the Bureau of Land Management.

Mechanical and Biological Options

Equipment

Being armed with the proper equipment to help yourself or a neighbor may be essential to stopping a fire when it starts rather than seeing it spread across acres of grasslands unchecked. Consider carrying the following tools on your vehicle(s):

- Water packs or tanks able to pump water
- Flappers
- Shovels/Pulaski axes

Larger equipment will be necessary if a fire is not stopped immediately after it ignites. A water wagon or pickup-box water tank able to pump water is ideal. ATVs with a spray pump ready and filled with water are helpful as well. Ensure machinery such as tillage equipment and skidders are ready so hasty firebreaks can be constructed as needed.

Firebreaks

If vulnerable or valuable areas of the operation are in particular danger, consider plowing a firebreak in anticipation of fire. There may not be time to construct firebreaks during a fire and preemptive firebreaks may be the best option.

Mowing strips of tall vegetation will make for strategic firebreaks as well. These areas will be even more effective if they are wetted at the time they are threatened by fire and can serve as a wet line. Also consider mowing or grazing areas with heavy or unutilized vegetation such as land with little historical use or around buildings.

Firebreaks should be at least 20-50 feet wide. Firebreaks may need to be wider depending on the fuel type and slope, and up to 100 feet wide in windy or steep areas. Especially consider building firebreaks around the following areas:

- Hay storage areas
- Outbuildings or other vulnerable headquarters areas
- Equipment
- Property boundaries as determined appropriate

Additional Water Supplies

When considering water supplies, think about water sources, water holding capacity, and the ability of fire fighting personnel to access the water using necessary equipment.

- Storage tanks for livestock watering system can provide additional water
- Install fittings on wells and retrofit irrigation pumps to make them accessible to fire department equipment
- Locate available hydrants and make them accessible to fire department equipment
- Install dry hydrants

CRP Options

The Farm Service Agency (FSA) is responsible for the administration of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

The following activities are allowed on CRP land **with prior approval by your local FSA office:**

- Installing fireguards according to NRCS Firebreaks Standard 394 – Fireguards are allowed in high risk areas, such as transportation corridors, rural communities, and adjacent to farmsteads.
- Management Activities
- Managed Haying and Grazing
- Maintenance of CRP Vegetative Cover

Wildfire Mitigation Assistance

NRCS Opportunities

Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) NRCS in Montana offers agricultural producers, including eligible farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners, several possible options for preventing or recovering from wildfires. These options include cost-shareable conservation practices that reduce soil erosion, address noxious weed infestations, reseed land, plant trees, and other conservation practices on burned land. EQIP also includes options that may help to prevent wildfires and/or minimize the impacts of wildfires. These options include cost-shareable conservation practices that plant green cover crops, plant field borders, install firebreaks, thin trees within forests for improved forest health, eliminate forest slash, and more. For more information on EQIP visit the Montana NRCS Web site at <http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/eqip/index.html>.

Other Funding Assistance

The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) offers two National Fire Plan fuels mitigation grant programs. The Wildland Urban Interface Grant program provides cost-share funds on a competitive basis to reduce fuels on private lands of the western United States. DNRC also offers the Community Protection Fuels Mitigation Grant. These funds are used to reduce fuels on private lands that are adjacent to federal lands where prescribed fire activities are planned in order to minimize threats to private property.

The Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service have helped to initiate community assistance funding, which provide technical and financial resources to county agencies in Montana to address wildfire prevention on private lands. In turn, local agencies or groups use the assistance to improve local wildfire preparedness and implement on-the-ground projects such as hazardous fuel reduction and firebreaks around ranch headquarters and other building sites. Sponsoring agencies may be different in every community. Contact the resources listed below to find out what assistance they have to offer in regards to fire prevention.

Many counties in Montana are also developing community wildfire protection plans through Community Assistance Program funding to address local wildfire issues and threats.

For More Information

Nearly every community in the West is considering wildfire prevention. Montana counties and towns are no exception. Get involved in the discussion. You may be able to help form local policy that will affect your property and you might find out about opportunities for assistance in implementing activities on your land.

Points of contact for more information regarding wildfire mitigation activities and financial and technical assistance in your area are:

- **Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)**
<http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/>
- **USDA Resource Conservation and Development Area (RC&D)**
<http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/partnerships/rcd.html>
- **Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC)**
<http://dnrc.mt.gov/forestry/fire/>
- **Conservation District**
<http://www.macdnet.org/>
- **U.S. Forest Service**
<http://www.fs.fed.us/>
- **Bureau of Land Management**
<http://www.blm.gov/mt/>
- **County Extension Agent**
<http://extn.msu.montana.edu/>
- **Local Fire Warden or Fire Department**

Wildfire Preparedness on Montana's Rangelands: Online Resources

NRCS

The NRCS Web site provides information about technical and financial assistance that may be available for wildfire rehabilitation as well as links for current fire information. The publication, "Wildfire Rehabilitation Assistance: What can you do to protect your home and property after a wildfire?" is also available at <http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/news/features/wildfires2012.html>.

DNRC

The DNRC has information on its fire prevention webpage ranging from burning debris safely to precautions that hunters can take in the field.

In addition, DNRC area land offices often host regional pre-season fire meetings of the federal, state, and county agencies involved in fire suppression. To find out more about these meetings in your area, contact the DNRC area land office or unit office.

Prevention - <http://dnrc.mt.gov/forestry/fire/prevention/>
Offices - <http://dnrc.mt.gov/Forestry/Personnel/>

Firewise

When planning for fire prevention on your agricultural operation, don't forget the ol' homestead. Information about having a "Firewise" home and yard is available at <http://www.firewise.org/>

Montana State University Extension

An abundance of information also exists about what to do after a fire. "After Wildfire: Information for landowners coping with the aftermath of wildfire," is a publication available from your local Extension Service or online at http://www.msuxextension.org/store/Products/After-Wildfire--Information-for-landowners-coping-with-the-aftermath-of-wildfire_4455.aspx.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all of its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, political beliefs, genetic information, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Stop 9410, Washington, DC 20250-9410, or call toll-free at (866) 632-9992 (English) or (800) 877-8339 (TDD) or (866) 377-8642 (English Federal-relay) or (800) 845-6136 (Spanish Federal-relay). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.