NRCS conservation project helps firefighters quench wildfire

When it comes to fighting wildfires in rural communities, conservation projects can save lives and property. That was the case during a recent fire fight in the Mist-Birkenfeld Rural Fire Protection District.

The crew responded to a wildfire call on Aug. 21, when a forest slash fire ignited on a mountain pass near the small town of Mist, located in the far west boundary of Columbia County, Oregon. Firefighters successfully battled the blazes using water from a nearby emergency water pond—a project made possible through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and partners.

“It’s a good thing the pond was there,” said Don Mehlhoff, NRCS district conservationist for Columbia County. “No other emergency water source is available for miles that can be used to combat natural gas well fires, residential fires or forest fires.”

Referred to as the Fleming pond, the project was completed in 2012 after nearly ten years of effort by NRCS and partners to obtain permits and secure funding. With a capacity of 4 million gallons, the pond was designed to serve multiple purposes, including livestock water supply, wildlife habitat, and emergency water supply for the Mist-Birkenfeld Rural Fire Protection District.

Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), NRCS worked with private landowner Bruce Fleming to provide technical...
and financial assistance for fencing, water troughs, livestock pipeline, trees and shrubs, and a small portion of the cost for the pond’s construction. NRCS also provided the engineering design and inspection for the project.

Now, three years after completion, the pond is providing a vital emergency water supply that can save lives and property against the threat of wildfire.

During the Aug. 21 fire response, firefighters were able to load 10 water tenders with water from the Fleming pond and transport it directly to the site of the fire.

“The ponds’ pumping capacity provided an uninterrupted water supply, which is essential to effectively respond to fires in a very rural, forested area,” Mehlhoff said.

The wildfire burned only four acres—but it potentially could have devastated hundreds of acres of surrounding privately-owned forests without the new pond and the pumping capacity to load water tenders around the clock.

The Fleming pond was a true community effort that would not have been possible without a willing landowner and multiple partners. Partners included:

- Private Landowner Bruce Fleming
- Northwest Oregon Resource Conservation and Development Council
- Mist-Birkenfeld Rural Fire Protection District (with special assistance from now retired Fire Chief David Crawford)
- Columbia Soil and Water Conservation District
- Upper Nehalem Watershed Council
- Northwest Natural Gas

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