

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 \$1.4 billion in cash receipts to the state's economy in 2016 (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.

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 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 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.

When organizing with neighbors, 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?
 - Is there rangeland next to 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?
 - In addition to 911, who are the emergency contacts for local land management agencies?
 - Can someone be a point of contact for communication among neighbors?
- Develop an action plan.
 - What tasks need to be done and who will be responsible?
 - What resources will be utilized?
 - Reassess seasonally.

If your land borders public lands, talk to the managing agency. Ask about hazardous fuels mitigation activities and how this might affect your property. Get details about fire suppression policy and response procedures. This applies to lessees also.

What resources does the local/rural fire department have to offer? Local

fire departments have experience 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 U.S. according to the Bureau of Land Management.

Mechanical and Biological Options

Equipment

The proper equipment may be essential to stopping a fire when it starts. Carry 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. 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. Ensure machinery such as tillage equipment and skidders are ready so firebreaks can be constructed as needed.

Firebreaks

If vulnerable or valuable areas of the operation are in danger, consider plowing or mowing firebreaks before a fire. There may not be time to construct firebreaks during a fire.

Mowing strips of tall vegetation also makes strategic firebreaks. These areas will be more effective if they are wetted

when fire threatens. Consider mowing or grazing areas with heavy vegetation such as land with little historical use and 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 hay storage areas, outbuildings or vulnerable headquarters areas, equipment, and property boundaries.

Additional Water Supplies

When considering water supplies, think about water sources, water holding capacity, and the ability of firefighting personnel to access the water with 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 following activities are allowed on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) land **with prior approval by your local Farm Service Agency office**:

- Fireguards, installed per NRCS Firebreaks Standard 394, 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

NRCS in Montana offers eligible agricultural producers including forest landowners several options for preventing or recovering from wildfires. The options are available through technical assistance and financial programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Recovery options may include practices that reduce soil erosion, address noxious weeds, reseed land, and plant trees. Prevention options may include planting green cover crops and field borders, installing firebreaks, thinning trees for improved forest health, and eliminating forest slash. Learn more about EQIP at <http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/> > Programs.

Montana DNRC Opportunities

The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) offers the Western Wildland Urban Interface Grant program, which provides cost-share funds on a competitive basis to reduce fuels on private lands.

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.

See the following list of contacts for local wildfire mitigation activities and assistance, as well as online reference materials.

- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) <http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/>
Check out Plants & Animals > Fire: Resources for Preparation, Monitoring, and Recovery.
- Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) <http://dnrc.mt.gov/divisions/forestry/fire-and-aviation>
Check out Prevention and Preparedness. In addition, DNRC often hosts regional preseason fire meetings of the federal, state, and county agencies involved in fire suppression. Get meeting info from your regional office at the link above > Forestry Assistance > DNRC Service Foresters.
- Conservation District <http://www.macdnet.org/>
- U.S. Forest Service <http://www.fs.fed.us/>
Here, you can search for your local forest to get local announcements or check out Managing the Land > Fire.
- Bureau of Land Management <http://www.blm.gov/mt/>
For regional information, see Programs > Fire and Aviation > State Information > Montana-Dakotas
- Montana State University Extension <http://extn.msu.montana.edu/>
Find your local Extension agent and search wildfire in the store helpful publications.
- Local Fire Warden or Fire Department
- Firewise <http://www.firewise.org>
When planning for fire prevention on your agricultural operation, don't forget the ol' homestead.

