



Private-citizen Involvement in Fire Management: A Case Study of the Black Canyon Rangeland Fire Protection Association

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Key Findings

- The Black Canyon RFFPA formed, in part, as a response to recurring conflicts between private citizens and fire managers concerning an inability to access land or grazing leases during previous wildfire events.

Broader Lesson: *An existing need, sometimes created by historical conflict, can provide an impetus to form an organization of private citizens to aid in fire suppression.*

- Communication was facilitated by the RFFPA structure and was a key to successful wildfire response. Initial tensions between land management agencies and the Black Canyon RFFPA were eased by joint trainings, recertifications, and prior familiarity.

Broader Lesson: *Communication, both within the organization itself and with other groups, is essential to the success of private citizen fire management organizations. Other organizations should create a framework that prioritizes communication.*

- Local context matters. The Black Canyon RFFPA had a unique set of locally influenced factors (e.g. fragmented land, aging population, rugged terrain) which altered how the RFFPA formed and functioned.

Broader Lesson: *Different places will have their own factors that influence the forming and functioning of a private citizen-led fire suppression group. These should be considered during decision making.*

Keywords. Rangeland fire protection associations; fire adapted communities; wildfire risk; cooperative management; fragmentation; western United States; rural local context; climate change; social science

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As wildfires in the western United States continue to increase in size and number due to [historical fire suppression](#) and [climate change](#), it is imperative for people living in fire-prone areas to “live with fire.” Fire suppression efforts are traditionally left to local, state and federal fire or land management agencies. However, high-activity fire seasons are prompting conversations about how private citizens and agencies can “co-manage” wildfire suppression to enable certain communities to better live with fire.

Rangeland Fire Protection Associations

(RFPAs) have emerged as a specific type of co-management entity within rangeland communities, allowing citizens to contribute to wildland fire suppression efforts on public rangelands after undergoing firefighter training with agency partners. FireEarth researchers interviewed 29 individuals who were either members and leaders of the Black Canyon RFFPA in southwestern Idaho or liaisons from various agencies that interact with the Black Canyon RFFPA to explore how RFPAs form and function.

The Black Canyon Rangeland Fire Protection Association

The Black Canyon RFFPA formed as a result of previous disputes between private citizens and fire managers about land access and the right to defend property during wildfire events. Interviewees recalled arguments with firefighters about the boundaries of public and private lands, which created confusion and prevented collective action. Black Canyon RFFPA members often encountered roadblocks when returning to defend their land during wildfire events, which they deemed unacceptable. Residents became interested in forming an organization to help resolve these recurring conflicts.

After formation, there were initial tensions between the BCRFFPA and local rural fire districts. Black Canyon RFFPA members with professional firefighting experience helped alleviate these issues by providing familiarity and a commu-

nicative link between the rural fire districts and other Black Canyon RFFPA members. Black Canyon RFFPA members also interacted with fire professionals from other agencies during fire response trainings and annual recertifications. This familiarity improved communication, cooperation, and response efficiency during wildfire events, which ultimately improved fire suppression efforts. Finally, interviewees stressed the importance of the Black Canyon RFFPA's potential to create dialogue between members that was previously absent, which would improve wildfire response.

Local context is a central theme that encapsulates each finding of the study. Specific items of local context that influenced the Black Canyon RFFPA formation and functioning included 1) the fragmented nature of the RFFPA members' lands, 2) an aging population, 3) the RFFPA's proximity to other firefighting entities, and 4) the ruggedness of the terrain. Other RFPAs and fire management organizations are subject to



The RFFPA logo on a truck owned by a local fire crew.
Credit: Amanda Stasiewicz



Cows grazing in a field. Credit: Darrell Kilgore, WSU CAHNRS Communications

their own unique factors that will influence effective formation and functioning. It is important for community leaders and land managers to be aware of their local context when developing similar group efforts to respond to wildfire.

While this study focused on a specific type of fire response organization, the findings are broadly applicable. RFPAs are inherently tied to rangeland communities, but ranching is not the only land use type within the Black Canyon area; public lands and residential developments are also widespread. As rural areas deal with [exurban sprawl and development](#), it may become increasingly important to understand how this novel approach to

rangeland fire management works in close quarters to more urban community types.

Other rural, land-tied communities feature similar land use development trajectories and other traits including strong familial and intra-community relationships, high levels of independence, working knowledge of ecosystem dynamics, and deep experience addressing natural resources issues. In the western United States, such communities

often depend on public lands and have experience interacting with federal and state agencies.

The lessons from this study of the Black Canyon RFPA members and surrounding community can be applied to similar rural, land-tied communities to improve their own response to wildfire, especially in forming and maintaining a fire management organization based around private-citizen involvement.

Foundational Publication

Stasiewicz, A. M., & Paveglio, T. B. (2017). *Factors influencing the development of Rangeland Fire Protection Associations: exploring fire mitigation programs for rural, resource-based communities*. *Society & Natural Resources*, 30(5), 627-641. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2016.1239296>