

The 2015 North-Central Idaho Wildfire Season: Impetus for Innovative Disaster Response Programming

Abstract

The extent and severity of wildfires in western states have increased to record levels in recent years. Now more than ever, Extension can play an important role in wildfire risk reduction and recovery. Extension's response to unprecedented incidents surrounding severe wildfires in Idaho in 2015 included interagency coordination and information sharing in addition to outreach with affected landowners. The approach garnered substantial recognition and could serve as a model for responding to this increasingly common natural disaster, as well as to other types of disasters.

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Introduction

Extension has a history of addressing natural disasters with programming that facilitates prevention and recovery (Black, 2012; Boteler, 2007; Koch, 1999), including programming focused on wildfire risk (Creighton, Baumgartner, & Gibbs, 2002). The extent and severity of wildfires have increased dramatically in recent years, especially in the West, with more acres burned in 2012 in the 11 western states (not including Alaska or Hawaii) than in any year since 1916 (O'Laughlin, 2013). In 2015 a new record was set for total acres burned in the United States, at 10.1 million, and federal firefighting costs exceeded \$2.1 billion, also a record (National Interagency Fire Center [NIFC], 2016).

Specifically, over 800,000 ac burned in Idaho in 2015 (NIFC, 2016). The winter of 2015 provided little snowpack for much of Idaho. By late spring, much of the state had progressed from being classified as abnormally dry to being classified as in severe drought, according to the U. S. Drought Monitor, and by August most of the state was classified as in extreme drought (National Drought Mitigation Center, 2016). Given the extremely dry fuels, and low humidity, conditions were ripe for wildfire starts when storms in August produced multiple lightning strikes in the north-central part of the state. Subsequent extreme wind events caused rapid fire spread, burning over 280,000 ac in the region, including over 60,000 ac of nonindustrial private land; additionally, dozens of homes were lost (Idaho Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts—Division II, 2016).

Due to circumstances that were previously atypical in Idaho—the threat and eventual reality of destruction of large amounts of private land and impacts on small communities—innovative action was needed. Extension responded to the wildfire threat in 2015 by conducting programming that addressed the evolving nature of the situation, before and after the fires. The efforts by Extension contributed to the formation of an interagency organization to address short-term and long-term fire recovery. Extension's having a flexible and strategic programming emphasis allowed for an effective and timely response to the needs of landowners affected by this natural disaster. This approach could serve as a model for Extension response to similar natural disasters in other settings.

Methods

Extension's response to the 2015 fire season in Idaho included three major components:

- conducting programs on reducing fire risk prior to the fire season;
- providing landowners affected by the fires with immediate information on agency assistance programs as well as education on actions they could take to recover their lands after fire; and
- acting in an information clearinghouse and coordination role for the multiple agencies involved in responding to fires that affected large areas of private land under various ownerships and overlapping agency jurisdictions.

Given the 2015 wildfire forecast, Extension offered the program Reducing Fire Risk in the Wildland-Urban Interface, developed in 2013, at two north-central Idaho locations in spring 2015. After the fires came in August, Extension took on the tasks of interagency coordination and information sharing for post-fire assessment and recovery. This coordination and information sharing was accomplished through the maintenance of an electronic mailing list that included approximately 100 addresses of county, state, and federal agency representatives. Multiagency technical meetings on coordinating a post-fire assessment also were held.

In addition, Extension conducted five landowner assistance meetings that brought together representatives from agencies involved in fire recovery assistance to explain to landowners what programs were available. Extension also assembled and distributed over 500 fire recovery information packets that included publications on how to recover wildfire-damaged lands as well as which agencies to contact for assistance. A special "fire recovery" edition of the Extension Fall Newsletter was published and mailed directly to over 2,600 rural landowners in the fire-affected areas.

Further, Extension conducted several educational workshops focused on fire recovery topics for landowners. Topics included salvage logging, erosion control, grass seeding, property and income tax implications of fire loss, pasture and rangeland rehabilitation, bark beetles and fire-damaged trees, and weed management following fire. Finally, a jointly sponsored conference was held in spring 2016 to present the results of the post-fire assessment to landowners.

Altogether, Extension held 18 public events in north-central Idaho in 2015 and 2016 in response to the fire season.

Outcome, Evaluation, and Lessons Learned

Agency and government leaders and landowners conveyed numerous positive comments regarding the value of Extension's role in responding to the wildfires. The interagency coordination efforts conducted by Extension contributed to the development of the North-Central Idaho Wildfire Restoration Group, led by the North-Central Idaho Division of Soil and Water Conservation Districts. The group's members include the Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Forest Service, soil and water conservation districts, county commissioners, county emergency management coordinators, Clearwater Basin Collaborative, Idaho Department of Lands, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, and Extension. This group received support from Idaho's senior U.S. senator and is being held up as a model for use elsewhere in the state.

The goals of the group include using post-fire assessment data (a) to acquire additional resources for helping hard-hit private landowners and (b) to prioritize resources on the basis of need and natural resources damage. Additionally, the group not only is looking at long-term recovery but also is focusing efforts and resources on land management that will reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire in the future. In 2016, the Idaho legislature appropriated \$100,000 to fund efforts of the group, including completion of the fire-assessment report and the beginning of recovery projects. The University of Idaho College of Agricultural and Life Sciences produced a video of Extension's wildfire recovery effort to communicate to the Idaho legislature the value of Extension's work to rural landowners (University of Idaho College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, 2016).

The events of the 2015 wildfire season in Idaho argue for development and/or maintenance of a strategic posture by Extension faculty to quickly respond to new circumstances, whether they are natural disasters such as wildfires or major economic changes that affect rural communities. Extension's reputation as a neutral and reliable third party encouraged multiple agencies and governmental bodies at various levels to accept Extension's lead in an agency coordination and information sharing effort in responding to this disaster.

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