

Fire Chief Richard Hoffmann

Crooked River Ranch RFPD, Oregon

Committee on Natural Resources

HR5132

May 12, 2016

Thank you Chairman McClintock and ranking member Tsongas and thank you for allowing me to share today. Crooked River Ranch is a rural fire protection district that serve a population of 5500 residents and hundreds of visitors every year. CRR is considered one of the largest unincorporated sub-divisions in Oregon. Our coverage area spans 12 square miles and is located on a peninsula wedged between the Crooked River and the Deschutes river canyons. While there are over 100 miles of road, there is only one entrance in and out of the ranch.

Along the western border of CRR lies the Deschutes Whychus Creek WSA which butts up to approximately 250 privately owned parcels of land averaging from 1 to 5 acres. The wilderness boundary literally starts where private property ends, there is no transition. The area between the private property line and the canyon wall is flat to gradient and spans 1/8<sup>th</sup> of a mile across in places. This same area was visited by a BLM fuels specialist in March of 2015. At that time, he determined that over 50% of the area above the canyon wall and within the WSA boundary contained Juniper trees in phase 2 and 3 condition. This describes the tree density as it has begun to suppress native understory vegetation. This condition can be problematic for fire suppression because higher density of Juniper can result in longer flame lengths, torching of trees and spot fires. Consensus of the fuels manager was that fuels treatment above the rim should be a priority. BLM estimates that over 50% of the existing Junipers should be removed. It was also noted that ground crews would not be utilized within this space due to the extreme hazard and potential for unpredictable fire behavior. Additionally, Jefferson County has classified this as a top priority through the Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

Our trails that start on the ranch and wind miles into the canyon have gained notoriety and are used heavily by hikers and anglers. It is not uncommon to find illegal camp fire rings located in the canyon and in the primitive BLM camp ground. Often CRR fire crews patrol and destroy make shift fire rings during summer months when open burning is not allowed. While BLM land is not our responsibility, fire in these regions are our top priority. You see a fire that starts within the canyon has only one way to travel, and that's up. Up means traveling through chutes and chimneys which are natural pathways leading to the flatlands above. These chutes and canyons are commonly littered with dry vegetation and Juniper trees. At the top of these draws stand more dry vegetation, trees, private homes and the citizens of Crooked River Ranch.

As a Fire Chief it is my responsibility to protect the lives and property of those I serve. This is commonly done through community risk reduction, in other words do everything in your power to reduce the risk or hazard before it happens.

Over the past few years Crooked River Ranch Fire & Rescue along with the Crooked River Ranch home owner's association have worked with private land owners to reduce the risk of wild fire through fuels treatment. The HOA itself has treated over 1/3 of the property identified as hazards. Funding for future projects remains a priority with the HOA. Wildfire evacuation signs have been installed throughout the ranch and an evacuation plan has been adopted utilizing the Ready Set Go platform managed by the International Fire Chiefs Association.

This important piece of legislation will move the boundary away from private properties and allow us to work with the Bureau of Land Management to begin the process of fuels mitigation to further improve defensible space for our community of over 2,600 properties. The lack of fuel mitigation has created a dangerous environment for tactical firefighting and remains one of our highest threats to Crooked River Ranch. Until proper mitigation is performed, it is unlikely we would place firefighters in such a volatile atmosphere.

Is all we are asking for is to move this boundary away from the private land -back to the top edge of the canyon rim.

This does not destroy the intent of the wilderness act and the Deschutes river corridor remains protected.

Help us avoid what is happening to our friends Canada this past week.

Thank you