

Idaho delivers equipment to Rangeland Fire Protection Associations

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Capital Press

Published on April 27, 2016 11:08AM



SEAN ELLIS/CAPITAL PRESS

Idaho rancher Michael Guerry explains to the media April 25 how wildland firefighting equipment provided by the Idaho Department of Lands will benefit the state's Rangeland Fire Protection Associations.

BOISE — The Idaho Department of Lands delivered four wildland firefighting engines and five “slip-in” units to five of the state’s six Rangeland Fire Protection Associations April 25.

The type 6 engines are light, mobile four-wheel drive vehicles that can hold 300 gallons of water.

The slip-in units can be placed on a pickup or flatbed truck and consist of a water tank, pump and hose reel and hold 75-300 gallons of water.

Idaho’s RFPAs were formed in 2013 by ranchers, who are trained by the BLM and assist federal and state agencies in fighting wildfires.

RFPA members use their own equipment, but the addition of these new engines and slip-in units will significantly boost their capacity, said Castleford rancher Michael Guerry, chairman of the Three Creek RFPA.

“A well-equipped engine like this will be very beneficial to us from a standpoint of early response,” he said shortly before RFPA members were given a basic overview of the equipment by IDL mechanics and operators.

IDL previously delivered four large water hauling tenders to two RFPAs.

IDL purchased some of the equipment through with state general fund dollars and grant funding from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and acquired some through the Federal Excess Personal Property program.

Julia Sullens, the IDL’s liaison to the RFPAs, said they have greatly benefited Idaho’s wildland firefighting capabilities, in part because they know the land so well and also because they can more quickly respond to many fires.

“The RFPAs add incredible capacity and benefit to the wildland firefighting force in Idaho and we are very pleased to be able to add to their capacity today by providing this equipment,” she said.

Idaho’s six RFPAs have around 300 members, mostly ranchers. Together, they provide primary protection on 1.4 million acres of private land and secondary protection on 6.3 million acres of federal and state land.

They assisted the state and BLM on 31 wildland fires last year and in many cases, provided quick, initial attack, Sullens said.

“The response time is the key and where we are out there already, we can get there so much faster and stop them before they get big,” said rancher David Rutan, a member of the Owyhee RFPA.

Guerry said the RFPAs have been a blessing to many ranchers, including himself, who were almost burned out dealing with the large number of wildland fires in southwestern Idaho, which has had more repeat fires in the past four decades than any other region in the country.

“It’s made my operation feasible,” Guerry said of the association’s effectiveness.

Sullens said ranchers fighting fires is not a new concept because they have been doing that for generations.

“Forming an association where they are working collaboratively together with the IDL and BLM, with the same training and same gear, that’s the new concept in Idaho,” she said. “They know the ground in and out and they provide valuable information. The knowledge that they have is a huge benefit.”