

# idea corner

## In Case of Fire: Anatomy of a CRD Program

*I can still remember the moment it happened, like it was yesterday, although it's been over three years now. The phone rang; it was Ernie, an agent from eastern Oregon.*

*"Hey, Bill, can you see if you can find me a set of plans on how to build a rural fire station? We've got a bunch of folks out here interested in putting together a fire department, and I'm afraid if they don't have some plans to follow, we'll end up with a barn."*

*"OK," I told Ernie half-heartedly. I really wasn't concerned with the problem at the time, but I offered to see what I could do.*

*No, the Ag Engineering Department on campus didn't have anything on fire stations—neither did the Extension stockroom, bulletin clerk, or anyone else.*

*The only things I could find were some outdated publications in the library on rural fire problems that must have been printed before I was born. Then there was this file of information one of our graduate students had collected on rural fire before he was transferred to another project. No plans for fire stations in it either. I kept the file away for safekeeping.*

*Called Ernie back a few days later. "Sorry, partner! Afraid I can't help you with this one."*

*Ernie said not to worry. They'd get by. But he did say we should be thinking about doing some work in rural fire problems. As far as he could see, all of eastern Oregon was burning down, and nobody was doing anything about it. That was just Ernie, I thought, looking out for the people in his county.*

It could have been in the shower, at the dinner table, or when I was out cutting firewood; one of those wierd times when it finally dawned on me. I began to have a conversation with myself.

"Just building a fire station like Ernie wanted won't do the trick."

"Why not?"

"Well, because there's more to it than that, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there are axes, picks, shovels, fire hoses, fire trucks, and even people."

"Where you gonna get trained people to operate all that equipment? I mean, I don't know much about it, but there's got to be more to rural fire protection than just building a fire station. How are they gonna keep the outfit operating after it's built?"

Then Ernie's words came ringing back in my ears: "You guys ought to do something about rural fire! The whole of eastern Oregon is burning down and nobody's doing anything!"

I did do something. I went back to my office and pulled out that graduate student's file on rural fire and began to read: 12,000 deaths and over 300,000 injuries due to fire each year in the United States. Some people spend months or years in hospitals recovering from burns. The problem's even worse for rural people. The death rate is double that of urban residents (even worse for nonwhite rural people) and the property damage is three to six times greater than urban communities.

A colleague of mine, Bruce Weber, and I became so interested in rural fire problems that we researched and wrote an Extension publication on rural fire protection alternatives.<sup>1</sup> I also

followed that publication with another on home fire safety.<sup>2</sup> Currently, we're preparing a set of materials on farm and ranch fire safety.

I was appointed to a statewide committee on fire master planning for the state of Oregon. On that committee, I met many people who were deeply concerned about fire problems, both rural and urban. They're insurance agents, fire fighters, educators, business officials, and local, state, and federal agency personnel.

All of us working together can do something about the fire problem. Extension can have a role by conducting educational programs on home, farm, and ranch fire safety and helping with the formation of rural fire districts in our communities. It's a natural area for Extension to be working in and one where help is definitely needed.

Our involvement in rural fire problems all happened because way back when, someone like Ernie asked a simple question like, "Hey, where are the plans for the rural fire station?"

To that I can only add . . . isn't that the way Extension work goes anyway?

### Footnotes

1. William J. Rompa and Bruce A. Weber, *Fire Protection Choices for Rural Oregon Communities*, Extension Circular 988 (Corvallis: Oregon State University, Extension Service, January, 1980).
2. William J. Rompa, *Home Fire Safety Checklist*, Extension Circular 989 (Corvallis: Oregon State University, Extension Service, reprinted March, 1980).

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