

Andrus Center receives grant to develop wildfire strategies

By KEITH RIDLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — The Andrus Center for Public Policy has been awarded a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to bring together federal, state, tribal and other entities to find ways to reduce the severity of rangeland wildfires.

The center will receive \$100,000 a year over five years to host a series of small workshops and conferences that will also look at ways to restore fire-damaged landscapes.

"The impact of these massive fires is devastating to our range and forest lands, our wildlife resources, and the people who live, work, and recreate in the rural areas of the American West," said Andrus Center Chairman and former Idaho Gov. Cecil Andrus in a statement released Tuesday. "It is imperative we develop workable, coordinated, and cost effective strategies to protect these vital western ecosystems."

John Freemuth, a senior fellow for environment and public lands at the center, is leading the effort that will produce papers and publications, as well as written agreements that might be developed between participating entities during the gatherings.

He said specific topics have yet to be selected, but he anticipates holding the various workshops and conferences at different locations in the West over the next five years.

"I think that the problems are both West-wide and specific enough that we ought to do it that way," said Freemuth, a public lands expert and Boise State University professor. "I think it's valuable in the rural West to go to them."

That the grant is for five years isn't an accident, said Freemuth and BLM spokesman Randy Eardley. At the end of that time the U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service will revisit the federal government's decision in September declaring that sage grouse didn't need federal protection under the Endangered Species Act.

"We need to make some changes and improve the rangeland and the sage-steppe ecosystem," Eardley said. "We're at a point where we need significant steps figuring out some ways to cut back on invasives, notably cheatgrass, and return the land to a more healthy, sustainable level."

Eardley said the BLM chose the Andrus Center to oversee the workshops and conferences because the center had the expertise in coordinating and holding those types of events.

Freemuth noted that the Andrus Center, with a history of bipartisan efforts, would remove some of the political pressure the BLM typically faces when it comes to land management decisions.

"They're a lightning rod," Freemuth said, "where we wouldn't be. Not that there won't be people always being critics, but the BLM would be a little insulated from that."

Freemuth said a likely topic for the workshops is cheatgrass, an invasive weed scientists and land managers blame for massive rangeland wildfires that destroy native ecosystems. He said the workshops and conferences won't start until early next year.

"We envision these as being smaller workshops and conferences that intensely focus on a variety of different issues and that hopefully give us some ideas, based on science, things that we can get done on the ground," Eardley said.

Freemuth said it's too early to know what kind of ideas the \$500,000 grant might lead to that could be applied to the land and get positive results.

"I'm in the middle of trying to make that happen," he said. "Objectively, you never know. But I think a lot of people are all rowing in the same direction now."