Northern Rockies Fire Science Network
A JFSP FIRE SCIENCE EXCHANGE NETWORK

Perspectives: University Extension Programs & Fire in the Northern Rockies

PERSPECTIVES 4 • APRIL 2026

"Extension has been a leader in community development and land management across the United States for well over a century," says Emily Jane Davis, director of the Oregon State University Extension Fire Program. "It has an essential role to play in wildfire adaptation. In states where governments share space and power, there have been great outcomes when Extension leads efforts to increase prescribed fire capacity, train practitioners, convene peer learning, and more."

But what exactly is Extension, and how does it incorporate wildfire adaptation and resilience? Understanding that question means first rewinding to 1862 when the Morrill Act distributed more than 11 million acres of federal lands to land-grant universities across the country. Idaho, for example, received 90,000 acres, part of which became the location for the University of Idaho, and part was sold to fund the construction, operation, and endowment of the University. The goal of the 1862 and subsequent 1890 Morrill Acts was to establish institutions that focused on agricultural and mechanical arts. Each state has at least one land-grant university, and in 1994, the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act added 36 Tribal colleges and universities to the land-grant system.

Land-grant universities are built on three foundational pillars: teaching, research, and extension. The passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914 developed the Cooperative Extension System, which incorporates federal, state, and local collaboration to bring science and research to people in the community. With Extension offices in nearly every county across the country, Extension agents translate science to practical applications on a variety of subjects.

In the Northern Rockies region, Montana State University and the University of Idaho are the two land-grant universities designated by the 1862 Morrill Act, and both have extension programs. The region also holds two Tribal colleges with extension programs: Salish Kootenai College and Blackfeet Community College. While traditionally the focus of Extension has been primarily on agriculture, over the course of the last century, programs have evolved to incorporate subjects such as forestry and, in some cases, fire.

NRFSN spoke with representatives from Montana State University Extension, University of Idaho Wildland Fire Center, Oregon State University Extension, Blackfeet Community College Extension, and Salish Kootenai College Extension to get their perspectives on the overlap of fire and Extension in the region and beyond.

The Northern Rockies Fire Science Network (NRFSN) serves as a go-to resource for managers and scientists involved in fire and fuels management in the Northern Rockies. Funded by the Joint Fire Science Program, NRFSN is one of 15 Fire Science Exchange Networks across the country. The network facilitates knowledge exchange by bringing people together to strengthen collaborations, synthesize science, and enhance science application around critical management issues.

NORTHERN ROCKIES FIRE SCIENCE NETWORK

JOINT FIRE SCIENCE PROGRAM

MONTANA STATE EXTENSION: A UNIQUE ARRANGEMENT

Peter Kolb has been Montana State University's (MSU) Extension forestry specialist for close to 30 years. Unlike programs in all other states, however, Montana is unique in that the College of Forestry is located at the University of Montana, not the land-grant institution, MSU. This leaves Peter in an interesting position; he lives and holds an office in Missoula on the University of Montana (UM) campus, but he is an employee of MSU, which is located in Bozeman.

"I'm out of sight…" Peter explained. "I'm left alone to do my work, but I don't have the same kind of support network." Peter's work takes him all across the state, implementing a stewardship program to help property owners assess and develop forest management plans for their property, putting on workshops about a variety of forestry topics, including pile burning, and producing an annual magazine which is sent out to a mailing list of forest landowners across Montana.

As the sole extension forest specialist for the entire state, Peter has his work cut out for him. But he emphasized that fire is a subset of forest management, so fire has always been a big part of his programming. He sees his role as that of a reviewer and translator, to take a scientific topic and make it understandable and applicable to landowners. In Montana, private landowners control roughly 4.5-5 million forested acres, around 20% of the state's forest lands.

The biggest challenge for the MSU Forestry Extension program comes down to funding. It receives funding through multiple sources, including Federal and state money (partially through Extension Smith-Lever funding), partnerships with the Montana Department of Natural Resources, and occasional grants from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. But because of the program's unique situation in Montana, Peter says it doesn't carry much clout within the broader Extension program at MSU. MSU Extension's primary focus is agriculture, and since it is not on MSU's campus or within a college or department, Extension forestry is "the stepchild."

Image 1: Peter Kolb discusses changes in forest ecology on a study trip to Germany (courtesy photo)

From Peter's perspective, extension programs are uniquely positioned to address wildfire and wildfire resilience because of the trust and relationships they hold. "Because Extension is located in every county, they have a connection with rural landowners," he said. "They have a good reputation as reputable sources; they're not seen as the ivory tower." To help maintain this relationship, his philosophy is not to tell people what to do, but instead offer them options for what they should be doing. "We give them tools," he said.

IDAHO'S WILDFIRE ADAPTATION COORDINATORS

At the University of Idaho, the recently formed Wildland Fire Center, led by Travis Paveglio, has stepped in to fill a need. While the University has a strong Extension program, fire has not received much focus. Through regional wildfire adaptation coordinators, the Wildland Fire Center aims to integrate expertise across jurisdictions to build knowledge in community adaptation, landscape restoration, and fire resiliency – essentially

Image 2: The Litte Pine Fire in Bonner County in Idaho. (Ashley Stoneham, Idaho Department of Lands)

fulfilling the role of Extension, but with an explicit wildfire focus.

Travis explained that the impetus for these positions came from fire summits hosted by the University of Idaho, Oregon State University, and the University of Washington, in which one of the recommendations from a social science panel was for there to be people in coordination roles who act as the go-between for communities, universities, and agencies. The program is currently in its pilot phase, with two positions, but the goal is to eventually expand to seven coordinators across the state. The coordinators are employed by the University of Idaho, but are also listed as dual employees with the Idaho Department of Lands.

> *"THEY ARE THE PEOPLE WHO ARE OPERATING DAY IN & DAY OUT TO MAKE THINGS GO A LITTLE MORE SEAMLESSLY"*
> *- Travis Paveglio*

Idaho has very specific regional challenges with wildfire, and Travis sees these coordinators as being much more responsive to what is going on on the ground and ultimately helping the system work better. Additionally, these coordinators offer a way to keep those on the research side at the university better informed and able to respond to research needs on the ground. While it is challenging to "be everybody's helper" and bring together divergent perspectives, Travis says building trust and creating those links is crucial to the work of creating wildfire adaptation and resilience.

TRIBAL COLLEGE EXTENSION IN THE NORTHERN ROCKIES

The Blackfeet Community College is located in Browning, MT, along the Rocky Mountain Front. Felix Nez leads the Extension program for the college. When it comes to incorporating fire into the program, he says they used to conduct prescribed burns with the local Blackfeet Hotshot crew to keep fuel down and show students about fuel reduction, but they haven't done a burn since 2024.

Across the mountains in Pablo, the Salish Kootenai College (SKC) Extension Office has been led by director Virgil Dupuis for nearly 30 years. In addition to Virgil, the Extension program consists of one other full-time employee and two part-time roles, along with a graduate student. The team works on a variety of projects ranging from developing a school garden network, to implementing a sustainable diets curriculum, to grassland restoration research. When it comes to addressing wildfire and wildfire resilience, Virgil explained that their biggest focus right now is on building an air quality monitoring network across the Flathead Reservation. Working with the University of Montana Climate Office, and the Purple Air Network, the SKC Extension Program was brought on to the project through a grant from the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

There are currently around 45 air sensors deployed, but Virgil said they're still working out the kinks. Educating people about what the sensors are and how to monitor them is a big part of that. During smoke events, it takes coordination with lots of people across all levels, including IT, facilities, and administrators, to help clean up the air inside the buildings. "We should provide safe areas for people to work, that's part of our mandate," Virgil said. "It's just a matter of how we get the behavior change."

EXTERNAL EXAMPLES: OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION FIRE PROGRAM

While not in the Northern Rockies region, Oregon State University's Extension Fire Program provides an example of what a robust extension fire program can look like in the western U.S. The OSU Fire Program uses a combination of outreach, education, and engagement to foster fire-adapted communities and resilient landscapes to wildfire through place-based partnerships. The program's team of six regional wildland fire specialists is led by Director Emily Jane (EJ) Davis, who has been in that role since September 2021.

EJ sees the program's biggest strength as being able to meet people where they are at, across Oregon's diverse landscapes and communities. Their work is focused on social and organizational change in wildfire adaptation. By representing both a university and having place-based specialists, the Extension program is uniquely positioned to build close relationships with community leaders, rural residents, and landowners. "This allows us to focus on wildfire as a multifaceted phenomenon that is about many things, from human health to forest and rangeland management," said EJ.

Image 3: EJ Davis (right) of the Oregon State University Extension Fire Program (courtesy photo)

That being said, social and organizational change does not always come easily. EJ says it can be challenging to navigate changes in state and federal wildfire policy and funding. Furthermore, ensuring that people on the ground are up to date and applying the latest social science on how to collaborate, educate, and build capacity can also be difficult.

She sees similarities between the work of extension programs and the national Fire Science Exchange Network (FSEN), in that both help bring people together and facilitate the transfer of credible, relevant knowledge to live with wildfire. However, Extension can be even more locally based than the exchanges, with many Extension agents throughout a given state that are focused on local communities. Both the FSEN and Extension programs share the goals of building deep relationships, providing opportunities for experiential learning, and participating in ongoing evaluation and adaptation.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Blackfeet Community College Extension Program (https://bfcc.edu/USDATribalCollegeExtensionProgram)
- Montana State University Extension Forestry (https://www.montana.edu/extension/forestry/)
- Oregon State University Extension Fire Program (https://extension.oregonstate.edu/fire-program)
- Salish Kootenai College Extension Office (https://extension.skc.edu/who-we-are/)
- University of Idaho Wildland Fire Center (https://www.uidaho.edu/natural-resources/

This publication was written by Ella Hall, with review by Darcy Hammond. Thank you to Peter Kolb, EJ Davis, Travis Paveglio, Virgil Dupuis, and Felix Nez for their time.

Scan to find this document on our website