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**Star-News**

**Valley County brings firewise program in-house**

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BY MAX SILVERSON
*The Star-News*

The Valley County firewise program to clear trees, brush and other wildfire hazards is set to expand, thanks to an agreement with the Payette National Forest.

Valley County commissioners approved an agreement with the Payette Tuesday through the Good Neighbor Authority, which allows for work to be funded across federal, state, local and private ownership boundaries, with the permission of each party.

The result of the agreement is about $495,000 in federal funding over five years to pay the wages and administrative costs of up to two employees to run the firewise program as a county function and increase the program’s capacity. The new county role will plan and facilitate firewise work, a job that has previously been contracted to Stephanie Nelson of Wildfire Prevention Associates.

Creating these positions is not only about getting the work done, but also creating programs within the county that have long-term sustainability, said Southwest Idaho Shared Stewardship Coordinator Brian Davis.

“This type of sustaining funding to start a long-term program is unheard of. We’re excited to be part of building a long-term program around the work Stephanie Nelson and County have been doing,” Davis said. “Wildfire doesn’t stop at property boundaries, and neither should our efforts to mitigate the risk.”

A second funding request of about $505,000 to further support the program with a total of $1 million over five years was made in August, but it is too early to speculate if and when it could be approved.

“This is a huge opportunity for the county to expand our natural resource footprint,” said Valley County Commissioner Sherry Maupin. “Working in collaboration with the Forest Service, the cities within Valley County and other partners, we can build firewise programs that help protect and defend against the fires we’ve seen in Paradise, California and Lahaina, Hawaii.”

Startup funding from the agreement is meant to build capacity and longevity to the point that the program can continue once the five years is up.

“This allows the county to build a program that is not just reliant on an individual, or someone that’s outside of the county’s general purview,” Nelson said.

Nelson has been operating the program as an independent contractor, utilizing federal funds allocated by the county. After 18 years in the business, she is aiming to retire. Under the new agreement, Nelson plans to continue working with the county until she can train a replacement.

“I will also be managing the current Hazard Fuels Reduction projects until the role is filled by someone else. My role as a consultant to Valley County would continue until my services are no longer needed,” Nelson said. “Bringing in the new position will be a chance to enhance what already is working and have a creative eye towards growing the message in many sectors of our community.”

Adams County signed a similar agreement in November of last year. Boise County signed one in August and Idaho County approved an agreement in May with the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest.

Each agreement is still in the startup phase, but Adams County has started working with landowners to plan projects and has identified 38 miles of roadside brush clearing.

The new partnerships allow counties to access vast funding pools from state and federal grants, increasing the scale of firewise work across the region in concert with similar efforts led by the Forest Service.

These agreements with the counties mark great strides in reducing hazardous trees and brush across private lands.

“These county agreements coupled with the Southwest Idaho Wildfire Crisis Strategy Project aimed at reducing fuels on federal lands is a real stride forward to making our communities more fire adapted and defendable should wildfire threaten them,” said Brian Harris, Public Affairs Officer of the Payette.

The Southwest Idaho Wildfire Crisis Strategy Project consists of about $59.5 million in federal funding for the Boise National Forests to complete projects on about 250,000 acres from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

The legislation includes about $550 billion in federal spending on infrastructure, including about $131 million nationwide for 10 large-scale projects to reduce the threat of wildfire.

Work is expected to be completed by 2029.