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Idaho Mountain Express

County moving ahead on drafting target-shooting law

Commissioners, sheriff discuss potential restrictions to reduce wildfire risk

- [By GREG FOLEY Express Staff Writer](#)
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Blaine County leaders this week decided to move forward with researching and drafting for consideration an ordinance to limit target shooting in the county during times of high or extreme fire danger.

In its regular meeting Tuesday in Hailey, the Board of County Commissioners discussed how a potential ordinance could be composed to lessen the wildfire risk posed by people shooting targets when conditions warrant without unduly imposing on their prerogative to pursue a popular form of outdoor recreation.

The discussions started last month, after a wildfire was started in July by alleged target shooting on Idaho Department of Lands property in Ohio Gulch, north of Hailey. The Ohio Fire threatened multiple neighborhoods in the area, ultimately burning 2,035 acres of land, largely in areas managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

On Tuesday, County Administrator Kirk Flannigan introduced the topic to commissioners, noting that they had previously conducted several short conversations about a potential target-shooting ban in unincorporated Blaine County. He then asked whether they wanted to continue discussions about a “very specific” ban when there is high wildfire danger.

Flannigan said he had met with representatives of the Idaho Department of Lands and talked to other governmental entities in the state that have bans on target shooting.

After a lengthy discussion among themselves and with Sheriff Morgan Ballis, commissioners instructed Flannigan to work with the sheriff and the county’s legal department to—as Flannigan put it—“fine tune what could possibly be an ordinance.”

Commission Chair Angenie McCleary started the discussion by reminding the board and others at the meeting that the 2018 Sharps Fire—which burned some 65,000 acres of land east of Bellevue—was started by someone shooting at an exploding target. The county considered developing an ordinance in response, to be “proactive in preventing fires,” she said.

Eventually, in 2021, the county passed an ordinance to ban non-law-enforcement personnel from shooting exploding targets on private lands between May 1 and Oct. 31 each year, with violators possibly charged with a misdemeanor.

Meanwhile, the BLM's 2026 Fire Protection Order prohibits individuals on BLM land from using fireworks, exploding targets, tracer rounds and steel ammunition. People are also prohibited from shooting at steel targets or burning explosive materials on BLM land.

McCleary promptly voiced support for working on a new ordinance to also ban target shooting in the county at specific times.

"I'd certainly like to move forward on putting the aspects of this ordinance together," she said.

Commissioner Lindsay Mollineaux said she would like the county to think about the ordinance "holistically," through considering legal and enforcement consequences, as well as how to adequately inform the public. She said she believes it is important to explain the "why" of such an ordinance, to inform people that the goal is public safety and not to unnecessarily restrict shooting guns.

"In Idaho, we take our rights quite seriously," she said.

Mollineaux said she believes pursuing an ordinance that further promotes public safety is "incredibly important" and should be a priority, while Commissioner Muffy Davis summed up her thoughts in two words.

"I'm supportive," she said.

Ballis gave extensive advice to county leaders, starting by noting that the Ohio Fire has brought the issue of target shooting into public discourse.

"This is obviously in the forefront of our minds, and I think we owe it to our population to do our due diligence to actually look into this," he said.

In doing so, the county should address several questions, Ballis said.

The county will have to determine whether the ordinance should be countywide or specific to certain areas, he said, and consider whether such a law would "push people further into the county" and possibly extend response times for officials in the event of an incident.

Would the ordinance be "turned on and off" as land conditions change, Ballis asked.

"Does it become confusing to the general public?" he asked.

In addition, the county would have to decide if the ordinance is specific to target shooting and which specific actions would constitute a violation. Not doing so could bring forth enforcement problems, he said.

Current restrictions in place—including the BLM’s seasonal order—are very broad, and the BLM restrictions “don’t have any teeth” for issuing penalties, Ballis said.

The county should also consider whether violations of the ordinance constitute a crime or should the focus instead be on restitution, such as financial compensation, Ballis said. Another question, he said, is how the county compares target shooting to legal hunting.

Is the wildfire risk of target shooting greater or equal to hunting in dry, hot seasons? he asked.

Of significant importance, as well, is having confirmed violations actually lead to punishment being handed down by the courts, Ballis said.

“The truth is, you can create what you want, you can enforce what you want. But if there is no follow-through with the judges, and if they’re not bought in, ... then the word’s going to get out that it really just doesn’t matter,” Ballis said.

With those questions in mind, Ballis reiterated his support for drafting an ordinance.

“I like the idea of having another enforcement option,” he said.

Amanda Greer, the county’s deputy prosecuting attorney, said a new shooting ordinance would have to be based on evidence of a bona fide threat to public safety.

Title 18 of Idaho Code states that counties can adopt ordinances that in some ways restrict or prohibit “the discharge of firearms within its boundaries,” but cannot prohibit a list of specific activities. Among those are hunting and shooting at targets at shooting ranges, Greer said.

In addition, she said, the law states that county restrictions on shooting on private lands can only be adopted if the activity poses a significant threat to the public.

Davis reaffirmed her support of moving forward with developing a target-shooting ordinance within the law, to “make the county as safe as possible.”

Both Greer and McCleary said part of the research into the ordinance hinges on getting additional information from investigations into the cause of the Ohio Fire.

As for its part, the Idaho Department of Lands told the Idaho Mountain Express on Wednesday that it has completed an investigation into the wildfire. A public records request to IDL to obtain the results of the investigation had not been fulfilled by press time.

Noting that the county is waiting for more information about the cause of the Ohio Fire, McCleary said Tuesday that she wants to proceed with work on the ordinance before all the necessary evidence is compiled.

“I think things should begin now, instead of waiting,” she said. [?](#)