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Fuels Planning: Science Synthesis and Integration

Social Issues Fact Sheet: 2

Developing Personal Responsibility for Fuels Reduction: Types of Information to Encourage Proactive Behavior



Pacific Northwest
Research Station



North Central
Research Station

Synthesizing Scientific Information for Fire and Fuels Project Managers

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Fuels planning: Science synthesis and integration, an interagency research/management partnership to support the Ten-Year Fire Plan, led by Russell T. Graham, RMRS, and Sarah M. McCaffrey, NCRS.



Field trip to the Squires Peak Fire, Applegate, OR. Field trips are an excellent way to provide information and vividly show the impacts of fuels management (photo credit: V. Sturtevant).

Why Proactive?

Your fuels management responsibilities may include providing local property owners with the information for taking responsibility for reducing fuels on their land. Research and experience tell us that property owners are interested in being involved in wildfire hazard mitigation activities. Research also shows us the expected: residents have greater knowledge of fire and fuel management strategies in places where education programs have been in

operation. For some people, this new knowledge is enough to trigger a new behavior. In this fact sheet we discuss the different kinds of information that you can provide property owners, information that may enhance proactive behavior to reduce fuels.

Types of Information

The following three types of information may be useful in programs to engage property owners in fuel reduction activities:

1. Procedural Information

Most of the information we provide property owners is “how-to” advice for reducing fuel loads. This “how-to” information is referred to as procedural information. Sometimes procedural information is simplified as “50 simple things you can do to make your home safe from wildfire,” or other such lists. While this type of information is necessary to help people know what to do and how to do it, it is usually not sufficient on its own.

2. Explanatory Information

For procedural information to be effective, it may need to be accompanied by explanations that justify the action. People often need reasons to justify recommended actions. In the absence of information, they may come up with their own reasons. For example, residents of one community were interviewed about why they did not create defensible space around their homes. One explanation they offered was that they had seen a fire jump a six-lane highway, so they figured why make the effort when no amount of defensible space could stop such a fire. Knowledge that the purpose of defensible space

is often not to stop a fire, but to reduce the severity of the fire around their homes, is information that could have helped these community members. Explanatory information is especially important when the recommended actions are complicated, seemingly counterintuitive, or when the justification is not common knowledge. The level of detail you provide should also be guided by the level of interest of your audience. Lengthy, detailed explanations will only work when the audience is already interested in the topic and is willing to put forth the effort to learn.

3. Impact Information

Property owners involved in fuels management have mentioned the importance of knowing if their actions are sufficient. This type of information is often called impact information. Impact information provides property owners with feedback on whether or not the action taken was done correctly, and the extent to which the action was (or will be) effective in reducing the severity of wildfire. Understandably,

you and your colleagues may be hesitant to promise results (for example, “If you clear 50 feet of defensible space, your home won’t burn”). However, you can encourage property owners to engage in proper fuels management while reinforcing messages regarding the unpredictability of wildfire. In addition, more feedback about the positive outcomes of actions similar to the ones they are being encouraged to undertake, such as better media coverage of structures saved by defensible space, will help property owners see that these actions can be worth doing.

More Information Is Not a Panacea

For some people, new information is not enough to trigger new behavior. In a future fact sheet, we discuss the importance of social acceptability and community norms in getting people interested in proactive behavior for reducing fuels.

Other fact sheets in this series will be available in the forthcoming months.

Social Science Team Fact Sheets

Look for fact sheet topics from the Social Science Team including information on developing personal responsibility for fuels reduction, communicating fire hazard, topics for community fire plans, guidelines for community education, and the “golden rule” for communicating fire hazard to people.

Fuels Planning: Synthesis and Integration

This fact sheet is one in a series being produced as part of a larger project supported by the USDA Forest Service to synthesize new knowledge and information relevant to fire and fuels management. Fact sheets address topics related to stand structure, environmental impacts, economics, and human responses to these factors. Information in the fact sheets is targeted for the dry forests of the Inland West, but is often applicable across broad regions of the country. For more information, please visit our Web site at: www.fs.fed.us/fire/tech_transfer/synthesis/synthesis_index

The Fuels Planning fact sheets are based on preliminary findings. Information from fact sheets will be synthesized in an upcoming publication.