

Fuels Planning: Science Synthesis and Integration

Social Issues Fact Sheet: 5

The Importance of Working Locally



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.

In another fact sheet (Social Issues Fact Sheet 2, RMRS-RN-21-2), we discussed the types of new information that can trigger new behavior. For some people, new information is not enough; they may need to evaluate the extent to which the new behavior is supported by people important to them, including family, friends, and neighbors. People who evaluate their actions in terms of what others think are often said to be guided by community norms. With respect to fuels management, this means that when you are “selling” a property owner on taking steps to reduce fuels you are not just “selling” to one person, but to a network of people. To reach people who are motivated by community norms, you need to work at the neighborhood or other local level.

Why Focus on the Local Area?

An old saying calls on people to “Think globally but act locally.” In wildland fire and fuels management, we might say “Plan at the landscape level but act at the local level.” Local residential units such as neighborhoods or subdivisions can be effective targets for fuels management campaigns because they (1) often have an organized homeowner association, (2) are made up of a relatively homogenous group of people, and (3) are set in similar fuel types. Local residents already know each other, and these local groups help define socially acceptable behaviors and set community norms.

One note of caution: Not everyone you need to reach lives in a neat subdivision or neighborhood. You must take care that the less affluent or poorly organized are not left out of education and communication efforts.



Squires Peak Field Trip. When neighbors come together for events such as field trips, new information is exchanged and the social acceptability of fuels management is reinforced (photo credit: V. Sturtevant).

How to Work Locally

Many fuels management programs have used a neighborhood approach to communicate and organize successfully. Below are three tools that can be used in a variety of situations but work especially well in neighborhoods or local residential units. Other techniques to change behavior are discussed in Social Issues Fact Sheet 3 (RMRS-RN-21-3).

1. Personal Contact

Face-to-face communication is more meaningful, interactive, and therefore memorable than one-way communications such as publications, television, and other media. If the person relaying the message is a neighbor, then the personal contact not only educates, but strengthens social support, provides peer approval, and reinforces community norms.



At a debris collection event in Bend, OR, neighbors model responsible fuels management and safely dispose of slash and other hazardous fuels (photo credit: V. Sturtevant).

2. Demonstration Areas

Demonstration areas provide a concrete vision of what the new behavior will look like, offer information about the consequences of the behavior, and offer immediate feedback without the risk of trying it yourself. It is important that the behavior is achievable for most property owners. Demonstration areas should be well situated for public viewing, and owners of the site should be amenable to visitors or tours. For example, at the High Desert Museum in Bend, OR, a fuels reduction demonstration project undertaken to show proper techniques

for reducing fuel loads brings the message of wildland fire management to local residents and thousands of tourists who visit the Museum each year. However, you don't need a beautiful natural area such as the one surrounding the High Desert Museum to create a demonstration area. Near Orlando, FL, Firewise landscaping was demonstrated in a Lowe's store parking lot by surrounding a cabin, erected just for the occasion, with potted landscaping plants. One side of the cabin showed landscaping using Firewise principles, including the use of fire resistant plants, while the other side showed landscaping that would increase fire risk. This is an approach that could work in any neighborhood in the United States.

3. Festivals and Events

Festivals and events can be good venues for raising awareness and generating enthusiasm. If organized by, for, and in a neighborhood, they can help build collective energy for action. Events can be a place where members of the neighborhood who have already taken steps to reduce fuels are recognized, and others are encouraged to follow suit. Events don't have to be overly elaborate. In Applegate, OR, a "Howdy Neighbor" social event held once a month at a community church also served as a useful forum for discussing community and individual wildland fire preparedness.

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.