



United States
Department
of Agriculture

Forest Service

Rocky Mountain
Research Station

Research Note
RMRS-RN-21-18-WWW

September 2006

Fuels Planning: Science Synthesis and Integration

Social Issues Fact Sheet: 18

Issues Affecting Social Acceptability of Fuels Treatments



Rocky Mountain
Research Station



Pacific Northwest
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*Synthesizing
Scientific
Information
for Fire and Fuels
Project Managers*

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Fuels Treatment and Public Opinion

So many decisions can impact the public's opinions and acceptance of various fuels treatments. But fuels management and public perceptions can be a two-way street: The public's perceptions and values can inform fuels management decisions; and information about fuels management can positively affect the public's preferences and attitudes.

The Impact of Information on Acceptance

Researchers have tried to understand how information about forest management can influence a person's landscape preferences and aesthetic appreciation, which in large part drive social acceptability. These findings are relevant for fuels management projects, since these projects are often characterized by conflicts between aesthetic and ecological objectives.

Research has found an increase in acceptance and visual quality ratings for clear cuts when members of the general public see how the forest will look once it regenerates. Yet, while more information might result in better understanding of why a landscape appears the way it does, that understanding does not always mean that people will find the landscape more acceptable. One study found that informing people about insect damage in southern pine forests lowered their preference for landscapes that showed the damage. But when no information was available, participants actually rated the insect-damage scenes higher. Researchers explained this by suggesting that participants liked the orange colors resulting from the damage in the trees.

Public Involvement in Stewardship

Involving members of the general public in ecological stewardship is one way to convey information that can boost social acceptance. For example, local residents who help cultivate native plant communities may be more amenable to ecosystem management.

Cues to Care

Sometimes forest managers can use visual cues in the landscape to convey information that can increase public acceptance. These "cues to care" can frame seemingly messy ecosystems—like those resulting from fuels management—in ways that convey human intention, visually informing people that landscapes are being managed and restored. This display of human intention is especially important when managed forests are adjacent to the wildland-urban interface or other high-use areas. Sample cues to care include mowing the edges of grassland areas, providing wildlife feeders, trimming shrubs, and adding fences or other architectural details.

Developing an Ecological Perspective

Despite a manager's best efforts, the general public does not always perceive ecologically healthy ecosystems and the processes that sustain them as aesthetically pleasing or even as evidence of good management.



Signs can provide “cues to care,” explaining that landscapes are being managed and restored, and often increasing public acceptance of management activities. Photo: E. Toman

Some suggest that this calls for cultivating a forest aesthetic based on an ecological perspective rather than a scenic perspective, as the renowned ecologist Aldo Leopold proposed. Even though people’s perceptions of what is scenic might be difficult to change, their knowledge and appreciation of ecosystem health and processes—instead of scenic beauty—could come to shape their sense of forest aesthetics.

An ecological perspective could translate into an appreciation for the more subtle beauty in landscapes, such as prairies, which may appear uniform or monotonous to the untrained eye.

Education and information are central to an informed aesthetic. In one researcher’s words, “Perhaps the most powerfully omnipresent form of environmental education is simply viewing the landscape.”

Source

Daniel, Terry C.; Valdiserri, Michael; Daniel, Carrie R.; Jakes, Pamela; Barro, Susan. 2005. Social science to improve fuels management: a synthesis of research on assessing social acceptability of fuels treatments. Gen. Tech. Rep. NC-259. St. Paul, MN: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, North Central Research Station. 52 p. Available online at <http://ncrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/viewpub.asp?key=3476> [2006, August 25]. For a hard copy, contact Pamela Jakes at pjakes@fs.fed.us.

Additional Acceptability Fact Sheets

Issues Affecting Social Acceptability of Fuels Treatments is one of two fact sheets on the topic of acceptability and fuels management. See also *Considering Social Acceptability of Fuels Treatments*, Social Issues Fact Sheet 17 (RMRS RN-21-17-WWW).

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, collaboration, and the “golden rule” for communicating fire hazard to people.

Fuels Planning: Science Synthesis and Integration is an inter-agency research/management partnership to support the Ten-Year Fire Plan, led by Russell T. Graham, RMRS, and Sarah M. McCaffrey, NCRS.

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