

# Fire Management on Public Forests and Rangelands

## A Survey of Citizens in Central Georgia: The Piedmont Plateau Region

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**Issue:** Public acceptance is critical to successful implementation of natural resource programs on federal lands. Managers concerned with implementing fuel management programs, especially at the wildland-urban interface, need accurate information about public attitudes toward fire and support for fuel reduction practices.

**Objectives:** The purpose of this project is to evaluate the public's perspectives and acceptance of wildland fuel programs on federal forests and rangelands. The setting is the fire-prone region of central Georgia where citizens are familiar with forest conditions and have a stake in management outcomes. Specific objectives include:

- Assess public opinion about treatment alternatives, smoke management, and agency communication strategies in affected communities.
- Identify factors that influence the acceptability of wildland fuel reduction strategies and decision processes.
- Measure public confidence in resource agencies for effective implementation of fuels reduction practices.

**Methods:** This study was part of a larger project that included a national survey, targeted surveys of seven fire-prone areas (in OR, UT, CO, AZ, GA, FL, and the Great Lakes Region) and evaluations of local outreach programs.

Findings presented here are a subset of data from a mail survey conducted in 2002 in communities surrounding the Oconee Natural Forest and the Piedmont National Wildlife refuge (n=91) to provide managers with locally relevant information about their publics. Discussions with local cooperators (Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) helped inform questionnaire design.

### Preliminary Results:

- Slightly less than half of the respondents thought it was likely that a wildfire will break out in the forests or rangelands near their home in the next five years (Figure 1).

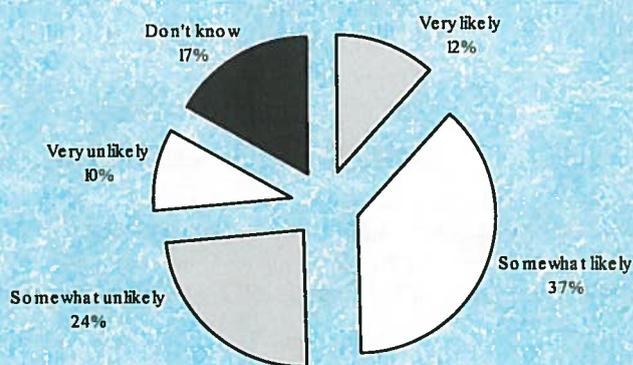


Figure 1: Perceived Likelihood of a Wildfire

- After reading a short description of each fuel management practice, respondents gave their opinions on the use of prescribed fire on public and private forests as well as grazing and mechanical vegetation removal on public lands (Table 1).

Mechanical vegetation removal received the strongest support overall. A majority thought this practice was a legitimate tool that manager should be able to use whenever they see fit. Each treatment received tacit approval with respondents showing the most caution over the use of prescribed fires on private land.

Table 1: Acceptance of Fuels Management Practices

	Prescribed Fires Public Land	Prescribed Fires Private Forests	Grazing	Mechanical Vegetation Removal
A legitimate tool that resource managers should be able to use whenever they see fit.	42%	30%	46%	59%
Something that should be done only infrequently, in carefully selected areas.	38%	45%	11%	12%
A practice that should not be considered because it creates too many negative impacts.	2%	10%	6%	4%
An unnecessary practice.	2%	0%	7%	5%
I know too little to make a judgment about this topic.	15%	15%	30%	21%

➤ Survey participants rated their level of concern about 11 possible effects of prescribed fire (Table 2). Six issues generated moderate to great concern among a majority of respondents. Most concern was expressed about the risk of starting an unplanned fire and the least was over effects on recreation opportunities.

**Table 2: Concerns about Possible Effects of Prescribed Fire**

	Moderate concern/ Great concern	Not a concern/ Slight concern
Risk of cinders starting an unplanned fire	72%	28%
Increased levels of smoke	62%	38%
Increased soil erosion	56%	44%
Deteriorated public water supply	56%	44%
Loss of wildlife and fish habitat	52%	48%
Hazard to driving safety	51%	49%
Risk to human safety	49%	51%
Damage to private property	47%	53%
Reduced scenic quality	45%	55%
Economic loss of useable timber	38%	62%
Effects on recreation opportunities	32%	68%

➤ More specific findings about smoke from prescribed fire (Table 3) suggest that it is managed acceptably and the use of prescribed fire should not be limited because of smoke.

**Table 3: Attitudes about Smoke**

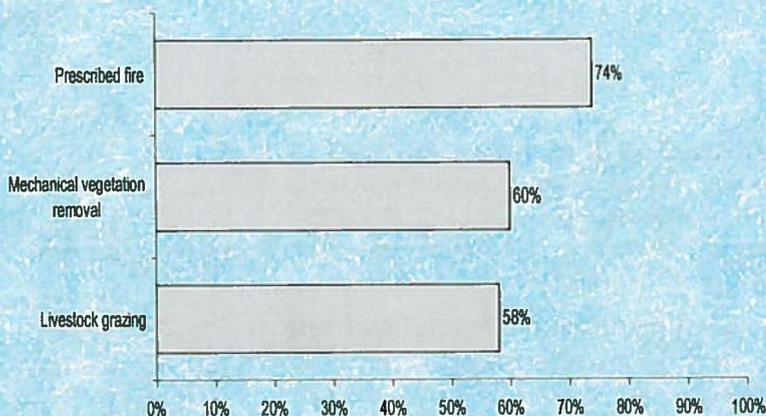
	Agree
Smoke levels from prescribed fire are a concern, but I think they are managed acceptably	52%
Smoke from prescribed fire is a necessary inconvenience	38%
I worry about the effects of smoke from prescribed fire on travel safety	37%
Smoke from prescribed fire has never been an issue with me	34%
I worry about the effects of smoke from prescribed fire on public health	24%
Because of the smoke, prescribed fire isn't worth it	4%

**Table 4: Trust in Agencies to Make Good Decisions about Wildfire Management**

	Full/Moderate	None/Limited	No opinion
Georgia Forestry Commission	78%	9%	13%
U.S. Forest Service	75%	11%	14%
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service	68%	13%	19%
County government	39%	47%	14%
Private timber and paper companies	39%	38%	23%
City government	20%	59%	21%

➤ The trust citizens have in land management agencies influences their judgments about the implementation of fuel management practices. Table 4 shows that over two-thirds of participants rated the Georgia Forestry Commission, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as trustworthy decision-makers.

➤ Participants were asked specifically about their confidence in the Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife Service to use certain fuel management practices (Figure 2). They reported the most confidence in the agencies' ability to use prescribed fire, though a majority also reported confidence in the use of each practice. (scale: none, limited, moderate, full)



**Figure 2: Confidence in Forest Service and BLM to Use Fuel Treatments (percent citing full or moderate confidence)**

➤ Information and knowledge play an important role in forming support for management practices. Citizens rated the usefulness of 12 different information programs in central Georgia (Figure 3). Ratings were influenced by factors such as ease of understanding and credibility. For presentation purposes, the outreach programs are depicted as either interactive or uni-directional. Interactive programs are those that provide for either personal contact with agency representatives or on-the-ground learning experiences. Uni-directional programs are those that typically involve a one-way flow of communication from the agency to the public.

Overall three of the four most useful programs were interactive, indicating greater dividends may be achieved from this form of outreach. Of the interactive programs only public meetings failed to resonate with less than one-fourth of respondents.

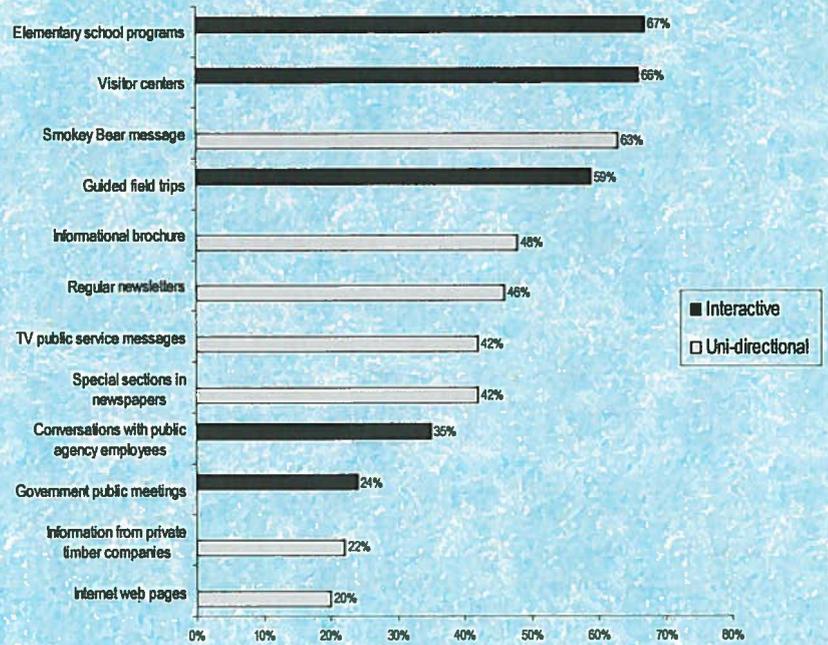


Figure 3: Usefulness of Fire Information Programs

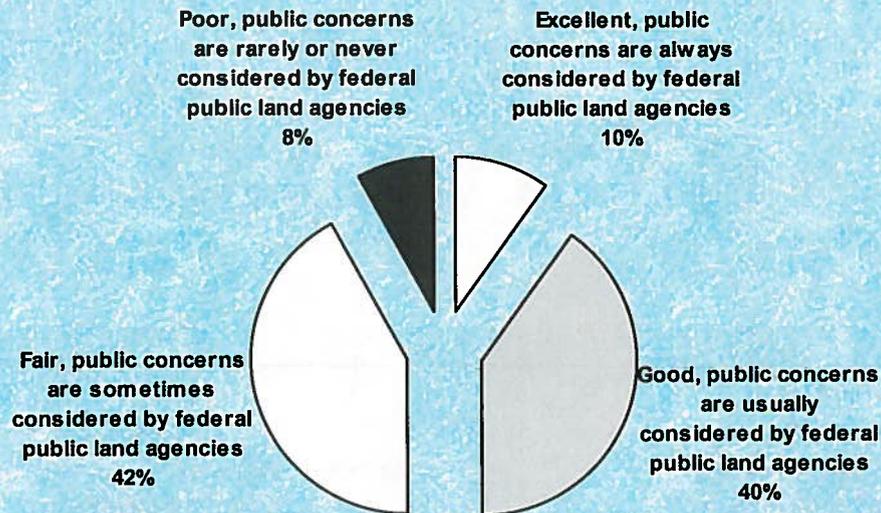


Figure 4: How Well Agencies Consider Public Concerns

➤ Positive citizen-agency relationships are key to successful implementation of forest practices. Citizens rated how well the Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife Service have done in considering public concerns in their management activities. Half rated the agencies as excellent or good at this important aspect of managing public lands (Figure 4).

**Conclusion:** Respondents are aware of a high risk for wildfire in central Georgia and overall are very supportive of fuel treatments. They are willing to give managers the greatest discretion to implement mechanical vegetation removal programs, yet reported the most trust in agencies for the use of prescribed fire. While generally concerned with potential impacts from prescribed fire, risks of unplanned fires drew particular concern among a majority of respondents. Many were also concerned about impacts from smoke, but findings further suggest that although smoke is an inconvenience, most respondents feel that it is managed in an acceptable manner. A substantial majority place trust in the Georgia Forestry Commission, the Forest Service, and the Fish and Wildlife Service to make good decisions regarding fire. Participants recognized three interactive forms of communication (school programs, visitors centers, field trips) as the most useful outreach activities for fire management. Smokey the bear also rated high. Finally, half of the participants gave the Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife Service good marks for incorporating public concerns in management plans.

The management issues discussed in this study are all important to citizens, especially when their local communities are subject to the threat of wildfire and various fuel treatments. Although responses show a majority of the public in favor of fire management practices, a number of citizens still are likely to withhold their full support of manager's actions. Experience from forest communities indicates that citizens will be waiting to see how well these policies play out before making final judgments.

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