

Fire Management on Public Forests and Rangelands

A Survey of Citizens in Southeast Georgia and Northeast Florida

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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 Southeast Georgia and Northeast Florida 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 Osceola National Forest and the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (n=82) to provide managers with locally relevant information about their publics. Discussions with local cooperators (U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) helped inform questionnaire design.

Preliminary Results:

- Most respondents thought it was likely that a wildfire will break out in the forest near their home in the next five years (Figure 1).

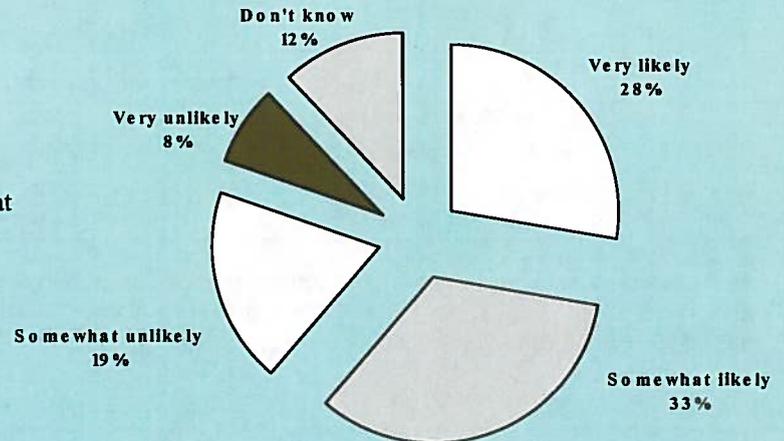


Figure 1: Perceived Likelihood of a Wildfire

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

Prescribed fires on public land received the most support overall. A solid majority thought this practice was a legitimate tool that managers 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 Land	Mechanical Vegetation Removal	Grazing
A legitimate tool that resource managers should be able to use whenever they see fit.	60%	39%	51%	51%
Something that should be done only infrequently, in carefully selected areas.	32%	37%	29%	12%
A practice that should not be considered because it creates too many negative impacts.	2%	9%	3%	6%
An unnecessary practice.	0%	6%	5%	5%
I know too little to make a judgment about this topic.	6%	9%	12%	26%

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	73%	27%
Risk to human safety	65%	35%
Hazard to driving safety	59%	41%
Loss of wildlife and fish habitat	56%	44%
Damage to private property	55%	45%
Increased levels of smoke	55%	45%
Economic loss of useable timber	45%	55%
Increased soil erosion	43%	57%
Effects on recreation opportunities	35%	65%
Reduced scenic quality	42%	58%
Effects on recreation opportunities	37%	63%

➤ 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 risks of unplanned fires and to human safety. The least was over effects on recreation opportunities.

Table 3: Attitudes about Smoke

	Agree
I worry about the effects of smoke from prescribed fire on travel safety	57%
I worry about the effects of smoke from prescribed fire on public health	54%
Smoke from prescribed fire is a necessary inconvenience	51%
Smoke levels from prescribed fire are a concern, but I think they are managed acceptably	46%
Smoke from prescribed fire has never been an issue with me	31%
Because of the smoke, prescribed fire isn't worth it	3%

➤ More specific findings about smoke from prescribed fire (Table 3) indicate concerns over travel safety and public health. However, most respondents still believe prescribed fire is worth the inconvenience.

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

	Full/Moderate	None/Limited	No opinion
U.S. Forest Service	78%	11%	11%
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service	74%	15%	11%
Private timber and paper companies	55%	29%	16%
Florida state government	52%	21%	27%
Georgia State government	48%	15%	37%
County government	48%	37%	15%
City government	37%	44%	19%

➤ The trust citizens have in land management agencies influences their judgments about the implementation of fuel management practices. Table 4 shows that approximately three-fourths of participants rated the 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). A majority reported confidence in the use of each practice with strongest support given to prescribed fire and livestock grazing. (scale: none, limited, moderate, full)

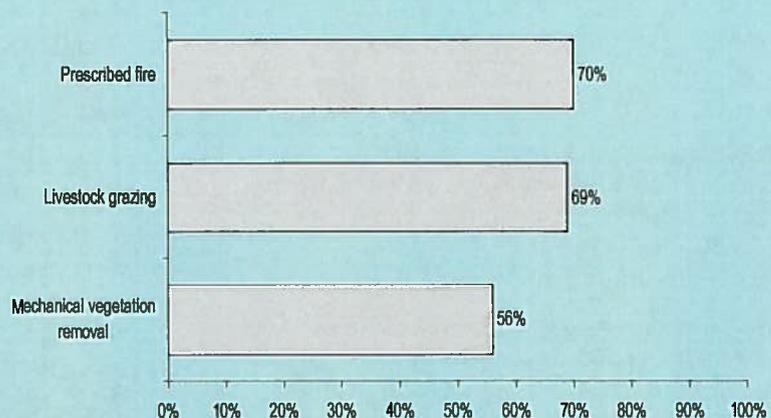


Figure 2: Confidence in Forest Service and BLM to Use Fuel Treatments (percent citing full or moderate confidence)

➤ Information and knowledge play an important role in forming support for management practices. Citizens rated the usefulness of 12 different information programs (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 the 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 a substantial number of respondents.

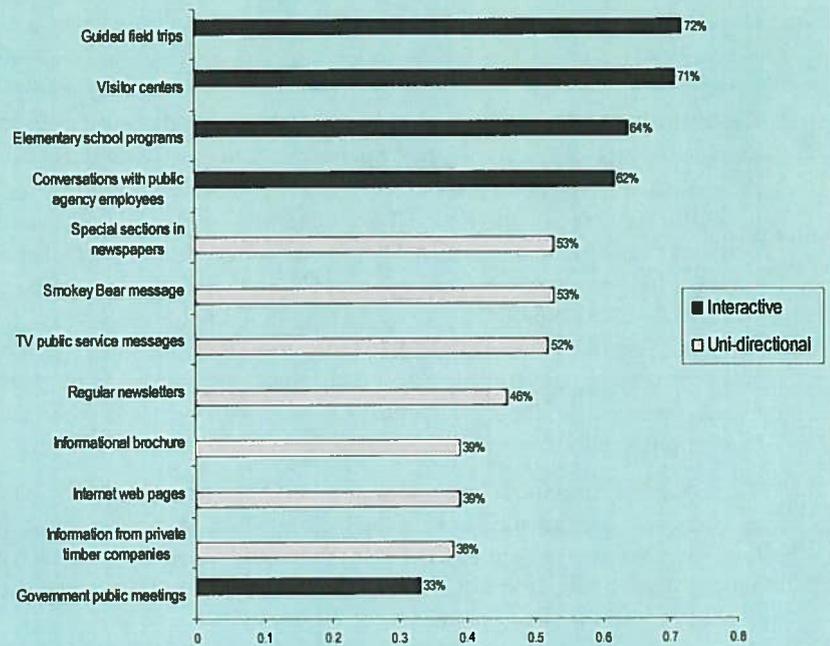


Figure 3: Usefulness of Fire Information Programs

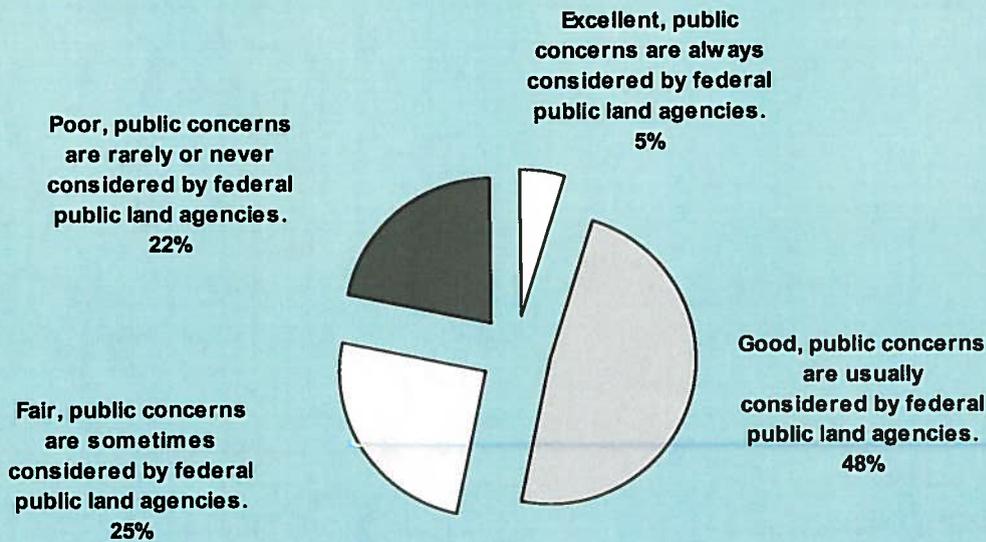


Figure 4: How Well Agencies Consider Public Concerns

➤ 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. A majority (53%) rated the agencies as either excellent or good at this important aspect of managing public lands (Figure 4).

Conclusion: Respondents are aware of a high risk for wildfire in southeast Georgia and northeast Florida and overall are very supportive of fuel treatments. They are willing to give managers the greatest discretion to implement prescribed burning on public lands and also indicated the most trust in agencies to utilize this treatment. While generally concerned with potential impacts from prescribed fire, risks of unplanned fires and to human safety 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 prescribed fire is still worthwhile. A substantial majority place trust in the Forest Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service to make good decisions regarding fire. Participants recognized four interactive forms of communication (field trips, visitor centers, school programs, and conversations with agency personnel) as the most useful outreach activities for fire management. Finally, over 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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