

# Fire Conditions on Public Forests & Rangelands A National Survey of Citizens



## Summary Frequency Distributions August 2001

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This preliminary report summarizes responses to a nationwide mail survey of citizens. Overall, 1,722 citizens were contacted and 754 completed the questionnaire for a 44% response rate. This report is a summary of frequency distributions only. Some response categories have been collapsed for presentation purposes (e.g. *strongly agree* and *agree* responses were combined into a single category). A more detailed analysis will be forthcoming in the final project report.

**Please note: Research for this project is still in progress. Do not cite information contained within this report without the permission of the authors.**



## Wildland Fire Study: A Nationwide Survey of Citizens

1. Prior to this survey, how much had you thought about wildfire on forests or rangelands?

|      |                 |              |
|------|-----------------|--------------|
| None | Moderate Amount | A Great Deal |
| 33%  | 37%             | 30%          |

2. Have you ever been in or personally witnessed a wildfire?

|     |     |
|-----|-----|
| Yes | No  |
| 36% | 64% |

3. About how far is it from your home to the nearest national or state forest or national park?

|                    |     |                     |    |
|--------------------|-----|---------------------|----|
| Less than 10 miles | 19% | 251-500 miles       | 5% |
| 11-50 miles        | 40% | more than 500 miles | 1% |
| 51-200 miles       | 26% | not sure            | 9% |

4. In your opinion, how would you rate the overall condition of America's public forests?

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Very healthy       | 4%  |
| Somewhat healthy   | 41% |
| Somewhat unhealthy | 19% |
| Very unhealthy     | 3%  |
| Don't know         | 33% |

5. People get information about natural resources from a variety of places. How useful have the following sources of information been to you? By useful we mean sources that you pay attention to and that provide good information. Please circle one number for each, or mark "no experience" if you have not had experience with a particular source.

|  | -----Level of Usefulness----- |               |             |
|--|-------------------------------|---------------|-------------|
|  | No experience                 | Moderate/High | None/Slight |
| a. Television programs   | 6%                            | 72%           | 24%         |
| b. Newspapers or magazines   | 5%                            | 69%           | 26%         |
| c. Radio station   | 12%                           | 39%           | 50%         |
| d. State government agencies   | 23%                           | 37%           | 41%         |
| e. Natural resource industry groups                                    | 21%                           | 32%           | 46%         |
| f. University scientists   | 15%                           | 31%           | 54%         |
| g. Friends or relatives  | 24%                           | 23%           | 53%         |
| h. Federal agencies (Forest Service, BLM, National Park Service, etc.) | 35%                           | 20%           | 45%         |
| i. Internet  | 39%                           | 18%           | 44%         |
| j. Environmental groups  | 35%                           | 18%           | 48%         |

6. Public trust in natural resource agencies is essential to the success of public land management programs. Please indicate your level of trust in the following groups to make or contribute to good management decisions. If you feel you have no basis for judgment, please mark "no opinion."

|  | -----Level of Trust----- |               |              |
|--|--------------------------|---------------|--------------|
|  | No opinion               | Full/Moderate | None/Limited |
| a. National Park Service   | 21%                      | 62%           | 18%          |
| b. U.S. Forest Service   | 22%                      | 59%           | 20%          |
| c. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service                                    | 22%                      | 58%           | 20%          |
| d. Your state department of natural resources (or equivalent agency) | 29%                      | 37%           | 35%          |
| e. University research scientists                                    | 38%                      | 36%           | 27%          |
| f. U.S. Bureau of Land Management                                    | 34%                      | 31%           | 35%          |
| g. Bureau of Indian Affairs  | 45%                      | 17%           | 37%          |

7. How familiar are you with the following natural resource terms?

|                           | I know the meaning | I've heard the term, but don't know the meaning | I've never heard the term. |
|---------------------------|--------------------|---|----------------------------|
| controlled burn           | 89%                | 6%  | 5%                         |
| native vegetation         | 81%                | 10%   | 9%                         |
| forest thinning           | 80%                | 13%   | 7%                         |
| watershed                 | 73%                | 18%   | 9%                         |
| rangelands                | 70%                | 23%   | 8%                         |
| Ecosystem management      | 65%                | 19%   | 16%                        |
| Hazardous fuels reduction | 60%                | 23%   | 17%                        |
| Noxious weeds             | 56%                | 21%   | 23%                        |
| Prescribed fire           | 52%                | 23%   | 25%                        |
| Biological diversity      | 49%                | 26%   | 25%                        |
| Forest succession         | 39%                | 32%   | 29%                        |
| Riparian zone             | 20%                | 22%   | 57%                        |

8. Please respond to the following statements to the best of your ability by indicating whether you believe each is generally true or false, or you are not sure.

|   | Generally true | Generally false | Not sure |
|---|----------------|-----------------|----------|
| a. Wildfires have played a significant role in shaping many of the nation's forests.                      | 71%            | 8%              | 21%      |
| b. Humans cause most of the wildfires in the U.S.   | 48%            | 32%             | 21%      |
| c. Fires can be an important force in controlling disease and insect outbreaks in forests and rangelands. | 62%            | 10%             | 28%      |
| d. Wildfires kill the majority of large trees in the burned area.   | 29%            | 39%             | 32%      |
| e. Many plants require occasional fires so that new seeds or seedlings can sprout.                        | 62%            | 12%             | 27%      |
| f. Fires kill a majority of the animals in a burned area.   | 24%            | 48%             | 28%      |

(Note: At this point in the questionnaire a description of prescribed fire and mechanical thinning practices was provided. Respondents were then asked the following questions.)

9. In my opinion, intentionally setting **prescribed fires** on public forests and rangelands is:

- A legitimate tool that resource managers should be able to use whenever they see fit. 41%
- Something that should be done only infrequently, in carefully selected areas. 39%
- A practice that should not be considered because it creates too many negative impacts. 4%
- An unnecessary practice. 1%
- I know too little to make a judgment about this topic. 15%

10. In my opinion, **mechanical vegetation removal** on public forests and rangelands is:

- A legitimate tool that resource managers should be able to use whenever they see fit. 48%
- Something that should be done only infrequently, in carefully selected areas. 25%
- A practice that should not be considered because it creates too many negative impacts. 3%
- An unnecessary practice. 3%
- I know too little to make a judgment about this topic. 21%

11. The use of **prescribed fire** may create concerns for some people. Please indicate how concerned you are about the following possible effects of prescribed fire.

|  | Moderate concern/<br>Great Concern | Not a concern/<br>Slight concern |
|--|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| a. loss of wildlife and fish habitat   | 64%                                | 36%                              |
| b. risk to human safety                | 59%                                | 41%                              |
| c. damage to private property          | 59%                                | 42%                              |
| d. deteriorated public water supply    | 56%                                | 44%                              |
| e. increased levels of smoke           | 53%                                | 47%                              |
| f. economic loss of useable timber     | 44%                                | 55%                              |
| g. reduced scenic quality              | 42%                                | 58%                              |
| h. effects on recreation opportunities | 41%                                | 60%                              |

12. Please respond to the following statements about **prescribed fires** by indicating whether you believe each is generally true or false, or you are not sure.

|   | Generally true | Generally false | Not sure |
|---|----------------|-----------------|----------|
| a. Prescribed fires kill the majority of large trees in the burned area.                          | 13%            | 59%             | 28%      |
| b. Prescribed fires promote the growth of plants that serve as food for deer and elk.             | 67%            | 7%              | 27%      |
| c. Prescribed fires kill most of the small, young trees and vegetation beneath the forest canopy. | 60%            | 14%             | 26%      |
| d. Prescribed fire is effective in controlling noxious weeds.                                     | 57%            | 9%              | 34%      |
| e. Prescribed fires kill a majority of animals in the burned area.                                | 11%            | 61%             | 28%      |

13. To help forest managers make decisions, what is your opinion about the following ideas:

|   | Agree/<br>Strongly agree | Uncertain | Disagree/<br>Strongly Disagree |
|---|--------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|
| a. It's okay to plant fire-resistant species in a forest or rangeland if they are already native to the area. | 73%                      | 23%       | 4%                             |
| b. Selectively thinning dead and dying trees is better than leaving them in the forest.                       | 66%                      | 20%       | 15%                            |
| c. Prescribed fire effectively reduces the amount of excess fuels in forests and rangelands.                  | 65%                      | 30%       | 6%                             |
| d. Livestock grazing is appropriate for reducing wildfire risk and fire severity on public lands.             | 61%                      | 28%       | 12%                            |
| e. It's okay to ignite a prescribed fire in a wild area but not near homes and private property.              | 55%                      | 25%       | 21%                            |
| f. Following nature's way is preferable to human intervention in ecosystems.                                  | 51%                      | 32%       | 17%                            |
| g. Because fire is part of nature, prescribed fire is a better tool than mechanical removal.                  | 34%                      | 44%       | 22%                            |
| h. All fires, regardless of origin, should be put out as soon as possible.                                    | 27%                      | 20%       | 53%                            |
| i. Prescribed fire is too dangerous to be used as a management tool.  | 13%                      | 25%       | 61%                            |

14. Did you hear about the forest fires at Los Alamos, New Mexico this past spring?

|     |     |
|-----|-----|
| No  | 24% |
| Yes | 76% |



14-a. Did the fires in Los Alamos influence how you feel about the use of prescribed fire?

|     |     |
|-----|-----|
| No  | 47% |
| Yes | 53% |



14-b. Please check *all that apply* regarding your current feelings concerning the use of prescribed fire.

- feel more negative about its use. 36%
- feel more positive about its use. 9%
- want to know more about its purpose and/or implementation. 32%
- feel more skeptical about the ability of natural resource agencies such as the Forest Service or the Park Service to effectively implement a prescribed fire program. 66%

15. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

I think the Los Alamos case was an isolated incident that should not keep prescribed fires from being used elsewhere in the country.

|            |     |
|------------|-----|
| Agree      | 60% |
| Disagree   | 28% |
| Don't know | 13% |

### Demographic Information

16. How often do you spend time in a national or state forest or national park?

|                       |     |
|-----------------------|-----|
| Never                 | 10% |
| Less than once a year | 27% |
| A few times a year    | 47% |
| About once a month    | 10% |
| About once a week     | 4%  |
| Several times a week  | 1%  |
| Daily                 | 1%  |

17. Which of the following best describes where you live?

|                               |     |                            |     |
|-------------------------------|-----|----------------------------|-----|
| rural area                    | 23% | city of 50,001 to 100,000  | 10% |
| town/city of 2,500 or less    | 10% | city of 100,001 to 250,000 | 7%  |
| town/city of 2,501 to 25,000  | 21% | city of 250,001 to 500,000 | 4%  |
| town/city of 25,001 to 50,000 | 11% | city of more than 500,000  | 14% |

18. How long have you lived in the same town? 25 years (average)  
How long in the same state? 38 years (average)

19. Which of the following best describes the community in which you grew up?

|               |     |            |     |
|---------------|-----|------------|-----|
| Urban area    | 16% | Small town | 37% |
| Suburban area | 25% | Rural area | 23% |

20. Gender: Male 65%  
Female 35%

21. Age: 53 years (average)

22. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

|                      |     |                           |     |
|----------------------|-----|---------------------------|-----|
| Some high school     | 8%  | Bachelor's degree         | 15% |
| High school graduate | 24% | Some graduate school      | 7%  |
| Some college         | 29% | Completed graduate degree | 17% |

23. Are you retired? Yes 33%

24. Please indicate if you are a member of any formal organizations below that are interested in public lands issues?

|                                  |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Recreation organization          | 10% |
| Farming, ranching, fishing group | 10% |
| Environmental organization       | 9%  |
| Forest industry group            | 2%  |

25. Circle the category that best describes where your household derives its primary income (if retired, select your former occupation)

|                                     |     |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Manufacturing, construction         | 23% |
| Professional (doctor, lawyer, etc.) | 19% |
| Other service industry              | 14% |
| Public sector (government)          | 10% |
| Education or research               | 9%  |
| Business owner                      | 8%  |
| Farming, ranching, fishing, mining  | 6%  |
| Forest industry                     | 2%  |
| Recreation, tourism                 | 1%  |
| Other                               | 9%  |