

## Survey Shows Cautious Public Support for Fire Reduction Efforts

While some forest protection advocates may bristle at forest thinning projects, prescribed burns, and other techniques forest managers use to reduce fire fuels, there is little information concerning the general public's response to these initiatives.

To gauge the public's attitudes toward such forestry activities, researchers at Oregon State University and Utah State University are investigating the factors that play a role in the public's acceptance

of land management practices.

The research is part of a Joint Fire Sciences Program being conducted in accordance with a number of federal agencies, including the National Interagency Fire Center, the USDA Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

"This study is designed to evaluate the public's understanding and acceptance of different wildland fuel treatments on federal forests and rangelands," says Bruce

Shindler, professor of forest resources at Oregon State University. Specifically, says Shindler, its purpose is to identify factors influencing the public's acceptance of fuels reduction strategies, examine citizens' understanding of the tradeoffs between management alternatives, and measure public confidence in resource agencies.

To identify these factors, Shindler and his colleague, Utah State University associate professor Mark Brunson, devised a three-part study incorporating a national survey designed to assess the general public's knowledge of and attitudes toward wildland fuels treatments; six regional studies in fire-prone areas of Oregon, Utah, Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, and Florida to assess the perspectives of more affected publics; and studies at regional sites where communities are exposed to outreach activities

by natural resource agencies.

To date, Shindler and Brunson have completed only the national survey portion of their research. In that survey, 1,722 people from a cross section of urban, small-town, and rural areas were contacted. Of those people, 85 percent lived within 200 miles or less of a national forest or national park, and most visited those areas at least once per year.

Shindler says the results of the survey shows that there is a lot of work to do to bolster the public's support for land management agencies and their work.

"Although the survey identified pockets of support for many of the new trends in forest management, one-third of the respondents had given no consideration at all to forest fires or the condition of America's forests," he said.

According to the survey, 41 percent of those polled viewed controlled burns as a legitimate resource tool. Another 39 percent said the practice should be done at selected times and places. Support for the limited use of mechanical thinning was only slightly higher.

Results from the survey also indicated that almost 50 percent of the respondents inaccurately believed humans caused the majority of wildfires and that 41 percent believed that prescribed fire kills most large trees within a burned area.

Although the majority of those surveyed were familiar with key management terms as "controlled burn" or "forest thinning," and about 60 percent of respondents held a high level of trust in the National Park Service, USDA Forest Service, and

US Fish and Wildlife Service, Shindler worries that the public's distrust in agencies such as the BLM and its apprehension about prescribed burning do not bode well for federal agencies.

"This survey clearly shows a considerable lack of understanding and perhaps disinterest among the public about wildfire, as well as a certain amount of distrust of federal agencies," Shindler said. "This makes it difficult for our land management agencies to take action."

To Fred Gonzalez, chair of the SAF Fire Working Group (D4), such findings are "not surprising."

To educate the public about fire, says Gonzalez, "You have to get them interested on a basic level and move outward from there."

As an example, Gonzalez points to the Firewise program of the National Wildland-Urban Interface Fire Program—a program that he says has been very successful educating the public about fire because it teaches citizens how to both create defensible space around their homes and to coordinate with their neighbors and local fire officials to develop community-wide fire protection plans.

"Once people are faced with a critical issue, they tend to learn more about it," Gonzalez says. After that happens, he says, then we can teach the public about what fire is and how it functions in ecosystems.

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Courtesy of USDA Forest Service

A member of a USDA Forest Service fire crew uses a drip torch to ignite a backburn near Buck Ranch, Montana.

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