

HOW DOES CONTEXT AFFECT ACCEPTABILITY JUDGMENTS ABOUT PRESCRIBED FIRE AND ITS MANAGEMENT?

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ABSTRACT

Citizens' acceptance of the use of prescribed fire in wildland management is of key interest to land managers. Public resistance to the use of prescribed fire can limit the viability of this practice as a management tool. Research suggests that contextual factors influence whether prescribed fire is considered an acceptable or unacceptable practice. We studied the effect of contextual factors that have been hypothesized to affect acceptability judgments about prescribed fire in the western United States. These factors included: the way in which data are presented to the public (the issue "frame"), whether or not proposals to use prescribed fire had been controversial in the past, how urban or rural an area is, and how economically or culturally tied an area has been to a specific forest type. Data were gathered from randomly selected households in the Northern Rocky Mountain region using a mail-back questionnaire. Overall, citizens were most likely to believe that prescribed fire should be used infrequently and in carefully selected areas. They also believe that fire is necessary to maintain healthy landscapes. The manner in which the purpose of prescribed burning was framed did not affect acceptability judgments. Areas that had opposed prescribed fire proposals in the past had less confidence in managers to effectively use prescribed fire as a tool. Rural areas viewed land management differently than urban areas. Differences were found between citizens residing in densely versus sparsely forested regions. Implications of these findings for the use of prescribed fire will be discussed.

Keywords: contextual factors, framing, prescribed fire, regional differences, rural, social acceptability, urban.

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PARTNERS IN FIRE EDUCATION PROJECT UPDATE

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ABSTRACT

Wildland fire management in the United States is becoming increasingly complex and costly given a variety of factors, ranging from the largely unchecked growth of the wildland-urban interface to the effects of climate change. While fire managers and scientists are increasingly aware of this need, and fire policies are evolving to better enable implementation of a full range of ecologically and socially appropriate fire management options, public acceptance of alternatives to suppression has not kept pace with these changes. To change this dynamic, Partners in Fire Education (PIFE), a broad stakeholder and interagency Steering Committee, under the umbrella of the Western Governors' Association's Forest Health Advisory Committee, used public opinion research and social marketing techniques to create a public education program focused on the beneficial role of fire. The two key goals of the research were: 1) to establish a baseline of public attitudes toward fire from which to measure future changes in attitudes; and 2) to craft language and messages that increase acceptance of an ecological role for fire. The ultimate goal of the program will be to allow land managers to use all the tools available for fire management where appropriate, not just suppression. Based on the key finding of the public opinion research, Partners in Fire Education has developed a public education program and a message framework to better communicate with the public about the ecological role of fire. The research shows that the public is able to understand the ecological role of fire and that with the right message they do support the use of controlled burning, fire use, and thinning as management tools to reduce future fire risk. By using the language and messages developed in the research, there is the opportunity to move the needle on the public's acceptance of fire in their communities and thereby increase the use of all tools for fire management including prescribed burns, fire use, and thinning.

Keywords: controlled burns, education, fire ecology, prescribed burns, prescribed fire, public opinion, public relations, wildland fire.

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