

Treatment—Social Issues



Fire Social Science Research: Opening Remarks

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Introduction

Determining the “appropriate place, appropriate time” for fuels treatments in response to forest wildfire risk is a social process that blends scientific information with social values and attitudes. Natural resource scientists and managers must realize that whether they like it or not, they contribute to this process. Social science perspectives and research can complement technical analyses to determine if, when, and where fuel treatments are appropriate.

Why Bother With Social Science?

The forestry community has long been aware of the importance of garnering public support for management decisions. Public land management decisions in particular have been subject to scrutiny and conflicting perspectives. Indeed, opinion polls and more rigorous random sample surveys show that the public is wary of logging on public lands. In recent years, this wariness has transferred even to fuel treatments to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildland forest fires. Even in geographic areas such as the Intermountain West where large forest fires have raised public awareness about unhealthy forest conditions, there are mixed messages about the relationship between the role of fire, forest health conditions, and forest practices. Fuel treatments such as thinning are still relatively new concepts and may conflict with deeply held values.

Perhaps more significant is the varying degrees of trust in resource managers. For whatever reason, public distrust of forestry professionals can be the most significant barrier to implementation, even if the science and economics are sound. For the public’s part, there is a lot at stake—aesthetics, property values, and conflicting visions of what forests should look like in the future.

In short, the sustainability of fuel treatment programs turns on public understanding and acceptance. Social science methods can provide insights and methodologies to identify gaps in public understanding and barriers to acceptance. Social science can also provide useful perspectives on institutions, organizational behavior, and decision-making. Social science research can complement forest resource managers’ efforts to innovate and adapt according to changing social contexts.

Three Problem Dimensions Worth Exploring

1. Who is the public?

A primary challenge facing forest resource managers is to identify the relevant public stakeholders who may be affected by or interested in the effects

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of fuel treatments. A rich array of social assessment tools and data sources are readily available to address this challenge. Obviously, the general public needs to be understood, especially concerning fuel treatments on public lands. However, resource management decisions are not necessarily popularity contests. Additionally, random sample general public surveys tend to aggregate responses across many important variables, such as knowledge of forest conditions and forest fire risk, risk perception, and geographic context, to name a few.

Public stakeholders that may have a more direct bearing on the appropriate place and timing of fuel treatments are communities, residents, and landowners directly affected by forest fires and fuel treatments. Such stakeholders tend to be more vocal and mobilize in response to activities that run contrary to their values. The challenge faced by forest resource managers vis-à-vis these stakeholders is to listen, understand, and work with the stakeholders towards productive courses of action. Of course, every community is different and the responses of community stakeholders to fuel treatment efforts can differ significantly depending on the context – geographic, social, economic, and political.

The importance of context cannot be overstated. Public understanding and acceptability of fire and fuel treatments tend to be “flashy” or episodic based on recent events. For example, people with immediate experience with the Cerro Grande fire of 2000 will have very different views on fuel treatments than individuals for whom the fire was a distant occurrence. Across communities, there are wide differences in expertise, capacity, and leadership to address unhealthy forest conditions and mitigate fire risk. One can imagine communities lying along a gradient of knowledge, capacity, and leadership. Two communities just 10 miles apart can have very different recognition of problems and understanding of options available to them.

2. Fuel treatments: the solution to what problem?

Despite the recent attention to fuel treatments among forestry professionals in the Intermountain West, questions remain about the true goals of such treatments, especially on public lands. The different perceptions of goals mirror the deep-seated conflicts over the purpose of public lands in general: Are they to be managed for multiple human uses or to be protected as the nation’s remaining biological heritage in the midst of landscapes long dominated by humans?

Again, context matters: specific treatments and prescriptions may be acceptable at a general level, but there are likely significant differences across particular contexts. For example, one may support thinning out dense stands of ponderosa pine across the Rocky Mountain West, but would resist logging “in my backyard.” Why the change of heart?

A medical analogy may be useful. Prescribing morphine to dull intense pain and minimize suffering is generally accepted as sound practice. However, should a doctor prescribe morphine to cure a headache? A morphine prescription is a treatment, but the treatment depends on the nature of the problem. Therein lies a significant difference between forest resource management and medicine: reaching consensus on the nature of “the problem” is often elusive and the source of intractable conflict. Even in the wake of catastrophic wildfires, there remains public debate over the true nature of “the problem.” Is it to protect private property? To protect public safety and welfare? To restore a small area of forest like a domestic watershed or across a large landscape like the entire Interior West? Forest resource and fire managers should not take for granted the existence of a consensus on the definition of the problem. Indeed, a conference entitled, “Reclaiming the concept of forest restoration

on public lands” is being held right after this conference in Boulder. It is being organized by a coalition of conservation groups and will highlight key differences in how the “forest health” problem is being defined in the public policy process.

3. Integration of science and public values

Forest management has always been a blend of science and values, yet the process of blending science and values has often been arbitrary and unsystematic. One result has been the increased intervention of the legislative and judicial systems in removing discretion and judgment from resource professionals in favor of highly regimented statutes, regulations, and procedures. A second result is that resource professionals are placed in the role of arbiter among competing stakeholder claims – the classic “loggers versus environmentalist” split being one such competition. Integrating science and public values can become obscured, leading to decisions that are neither technically sound nor socially acceptable.

Efforts are being undertaken across the West to move beyond “analysis paralysis” towards more collaborative approaches to defining and addressing problems related to unhealthy forests and fire risk. However, collaboration is easier said than done. Collaborative efforts are time-consuming and often do not produce expected results – perhaps because expectations are unrealistically high for collaborative processes. Much work remains to be done in designing and evaluating collaborative planning processes and adaptive management strategies. One thing is clear: there is no one universal model. However, collaborative processes hold the promise that determining the appropriate places and times for fuel treatments can be widely supported and readily implemented. The sustainability of forest ecosystems may indeed depend on collaborative processes making honest and earnest efforts.

Summary

Determining the appropriate places and times for fuel treatments to address forest fire risk occurs in a complex social context. Understanding and effectively engaging within this context is imperative for forest resource managers. Social science perspectives and research methods should not be considered addenda or afterthoughts in developing fuel treatment plans, as they can offer insights on public perceptions and strategies for effectively engaging public stakeholders.

