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Fuels Planning: Science Synthesis and Integration

Social Issues Fact Sheet: 17

Considering Social Acceptability of Fuels Treatments



Rocky Mountain
Research Station



Pacific Northwest
Research Station



North Central
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*Pacific Southwest
Research Station*

*Synthesizing
Scientific
Information
for Fire and Fuels
Project Managers*

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Why Assess Social Impacts?

When making decisions about fuels treatments, forest managers need to assess not only the biological impacts of a treatment, but the social impacts as well. How will local residents react to certain treatments? Are some treatments more likely to gain local support than others?

While the general public's reactions to fuels treatments cannot reasonably be the sole basis for treatment decisions, being able to gauge social impacts can help managers weigh alternatives, and minimize or be prepared for possible controversy. It can also set the stage for partnerships between the public and land managers as they seek to protect public safety, and manage or restore ecosystems.

Social Acceptability

One general measure of social impact is "acceptability." Social acceptability is based on value judgments by people—their notions of what is "good" and what is "better." For example, managers may be interested in answering the question, "Do stakeholders judge treatment X to be more socially acceptable than treatment Y for reducing hazardous fuels?" Or they might want to focus on a management goal rather than a treatment method, asking, "Is it more socially acceptable to manage for fuels reduction or ecosystem restoration?"



There are a number of ways to collect information from people to assess social acceptability. Using computers set up at local businesses is one approach. Photo: P. Jakes

With the help of social scientists, forest managers can gather and analyze information related to social acceptability. The following six questions are useful for framing initial discussions between you and your social science colleagues when initiating an assessment of social acceptability.

- 1) **How will we define the fuels treatments we are assessing?** Fuels treatments can be defined at a broad, abstract policy level or at a narrow, concrete level. Most forest managers are interested in the more narrow definitions, which may include details like the site's location, how the treatment will be conducted, how many trees will be removed, and so on.
- 2) **How will we represent the fuels treatments to people?** Verbal descriptions or labels are often used to describe broadly defined fuels treatments developed at a policy level. When fuels treatments are more precisely defined, managers may take stakeholders on site visits to view different treatments firsthand. Or they may show people photographs or computer-generated images representing specific treatments.
- 3) **Whose opinions are we seeking?** Managers may want to assess acceptability for several constituent groups, including local residents, who may be directly affected by a given fuels treatment, or distant national constituencies, who also have a stake in Federal land management.
- 4) **How will we contact people?** Verbal surveys, by telephone or mail, have been the most popular means of contacting people and gathering information at the broader policy end of the spectrum, when national constituencies are most relevant. When the target is primarily a local population and the treatment or site in question is more specific, focus groups or interviews are effective.
- 5) **How will people express their judgments?** Often researchers seek people's judgments by using rating scales (agree-disagree, unacceptable-acceptable) and other such measurable responses. With focus groups and interviews,

open-ended responses that are more descriptive are an effective way to identify people's concerns.

- 6) **How will data be analyzed and synthesized?** Data collected through the use of verbal surveys can be analyzed using powerful statistical tools. Narratives collected during focus groups or interviews may provide richer, specific expressions of concern. But ensuring the reliability of narratives and generalizing from them is much more difficult to do. Often, it is also less clear what an appropriate management response would be to the information.

It is important to find the best method for assessing the particular treatment issue at hand. By strategically selecting methods that fit the management context, managers and social scientists should be able to better understand which fuels treatment policies and actions are more socially acceptable and why. This information can improve the design and communication of fuels management options—leading to greater public acceptance and support, and greater success at achieving public safety and ecological protection goals.

Source

Daniel, Terry C.; Valdiserri, Michael; Daniel, Carrie R.; Jakes, Pamela; Barro, Susan. 2005. Social science to improve fuels management: a synthesis of research on assessing social acceptability of fuels treatments. Gen. Tech. Rep. NC-259. St. Paul, MN: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, North Central Research Station. 52 p. Available online at <http://ncrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/viewpub.asp?key=3476> [2006, August 25]. For a hard copy, contact Pamela Jakes at pjakes@fs.fed.us.

Additional Acceptability Fact Sheets

Considering Social Acceptability of Fuels Treatments is one of two fact sheets on the topic of acceptability and fuels management. See also *Issues Affecting Social Acceptability of Fuels Treatments*, Social Issues Fact Sheet 18 (RMRS RN-21-18-WWW).

Social Science Team Fact Sheets

Look for fact sheet topics from the Social Science Team including information on developing personal responsibility for fuels reduction, communicating fire hazard, topics for community fire plans, guidelines for community education, collaboration, and the "golden rule" for communicating fire hazard to people.

Fuels Planning: Science Synthesis and Integration is an inter-agency research/management partnership to support the Ten-Year Fire Plan, led by Russell T. Graham, RMRS, and Sarah M. McCaffrey, NCRS.

Fuels Planning: Synthesis and Integration

This fact sheet is one in a series being produced as part of a larger project supported by the USDA Forest Service to synthesize new knowledge and information relevant to fire and fuels management. Fact sheets address topics related to stand structure, environmental impacts, economics, and human responses to these factors. Information in the fact sheets is targeted for the dry forests of the Inland West, but is often applicable across broad regions of the country. For more information, please visit our Web site at: www.fs.fed.us/fire/tech_transfer/synthesis/synthesis_index