

# Dealing With Public Concerns in Restoring Fire to the Forest

Leslie A. C. Weldon

Public support is important to all restoration efforts on public lands. Some types of restoration activities are easier for the public to support than others. Restoring wetlands, habitat restoration for salmon or burrowing owls, and vegetative rehabilitation are generally acceptable practices. Most restoration projects and activities such as these do not have much direct impact on people. However, restoring ecological processes, such as fire, is a different story. In this paper, I describe the challenges of restoring fire to the forest. I share some of the opinions of people in the Bitterroot Valley of western Montana regarding management ignited prescribed fire, and examine some of the major barriers to public acceptance. I also suggest ways to increase public support for fire restoration—concepts that should be part of every fire restoration effort.

Federal land managers are responsible for ensuring the long-term health and sustainability of forests and grasslands by using the best scientific information available. As is evidenced by decades of research and over a century of experience, the best scientific information has told us that fire is key to maintaining long-term sustainability of most ecosystems in the Western United States.

While prescribed fire is not a new tool in forest management, the sizes and frequencies recommended by scientists and managers to meet ecological goals are new, and they are highly controversial. In many places, certainly in the Bitterroot Valley, the emotions surrounding wildfire or management ignited fire are as passionate among those against it as they are among those who support it.

## Background

As part of the Bitterroot Ecosystem Management Research Project, a social assessment was conducted by Sociologist Dr. Janie Canton-Thompson, director of the Bitterroot Social Research Institute. This social assessment involved in-depth interviews with opinion leaders and focused on management of the Bitterroot National Forest and use of prescribed fire. The Bitterroot Valley, located in Ravalli County, Montana, is surrounded by National Forest land. In 1995, Ravalli County was listed as the second fastest growing county in the state of Montana. People are coming to the valley in part because of its natural beauty which contributes to the quality of life that so many newcomers are seeking. These are the same qualities that “native

Bitterrooters” have enjoyed for generations. The valley communities are going through significant changes. The values, concerns, wants and needs relating to natural resource management are complex.

Prescribed fire currently receives mixed support among residents of the Bitterroot Valley. The following excerpts are quotes made by interviews for the “Social Assessment of the Bitterroot Valley, Montana with Special Emphasis on National Forest Management” (Canton-Thompson 1994).

“...they should mix it in with other activities so they don't have to put all that fiber into smoke. They should use what they can and then burn what's left over.”

“Use management ignited prescribed fire as a last resort when there is no other way to gain your objective.”

“I believe there's a place for it...but actually getting it done in a practical fashion is another thing altogether.”

“Prescribed fire does the same as natural wildfire, but you can control it under good conditions. Using it managed is better than nature doing it when conditions are bad.”

“I'm kind of reserved about it, and I would have to be shown it really helped to believe it.”

“In fact, I'm always bewildered when I see prescribed fires happening. I never know what the Forest Service is doing. I'm always confused when I see prescribed burns...Maybe they're doing a good thing, but I don't know about it...[I]t irritates people in the fall to see the Forest Service doing burns upon the sides of the mountain because those fall days are the best.”

## Challenges to Successful Fire Restoration

### Mixed Messages About Fire

Smokey Bear recently celebrated his 50th birthday. This anniversary marks 50 years of one of the most successful public information campaigns ever launched. Smokey and his fire prevention message are part of our culture, and still remain popular in American society. Smokey's message worked hand-in-hand with a highly effective fire suppression organization that met the fire exclusion goals of minimizing loss of forest resources to wildfire. However, fire exclusion has caused substantial interruption to natural ecosystem function across most of America's wildlands. Fire suppression still has a role in protecting resources and property. Although it is a critical ecological process, we can't let it operate unmanaged and unmonitored. The suburban-wildland interface areas are places where fire suppression continues to dominate. However, support is growing to permit some fires to burn, and for management ignited prescribed fires for natural resource management.

In: Hardy, Colin C.; Arno, Stephen F., eds. 1996. The use of fire in forest restoration. Gen. Tech. Rep. INT-GTR-341. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Intermountain Research Station.

Leslie A. C. Weldon is a District Ranger, Stevensville Ranger District, Bitterroot National Forest, USDA Forest Service, Stevensville, MT 59870.

A key message for the public is that even as we work to restore fire on the landscape, the commitment to protecting lives, property, and resources through fire suppression will continue.

## Understanding of Fire's Role in Forested Ecosystems

Over the last 7 years since the spectacular 1988 fire season, the public, particularly in the West, has become more aware of the role of fire. But we have much work to do here, and much to gain from people achieving a better understanding of the ecological role of fire processes. The use and role of fire will then make better sense to them, and will become more familiar and acceptable.

## Perceptions of Wood Fiber Waste

As is evident in the quotes from the social assessment, wood fiber waste from prescribed fires is a key concern. This is especially true in communities where forest products are a source of income, or a source of heat. Waste is not good. But prescribed fire burns wood fiber and kills some trees. In many cases, this loss is expected as part of meeting burn objectives, but loss of wood fiber also occurs when fire intensity is higher than expected or when escaped fire occurs. It is frequently not economically feasible to extract, haul, and utilize woody biomass within the constraints of existing transportation systems and low market values.

## Effects of Prescribed Fire Smoke on Visual Quality and Human Health

Smoke affects people. To some, it is a minor annoyance, for example, in producing haze that degrades the visual quality of a sunny day. To others, smoke can seriously aggravate preexisting respiratory conditions. Smoke from prescribed fires can alter air quality over large areas. The other visual quality effect is that of the fire on the landscape. To many people, burned landscapes are not attractive and detract from the aesthetic values of an area.

## Interacting With the Public

None of these challenges can be resolved without directly interacting with the public and communities who are affected by prescribed fire. Strategies, goals, and objectives for public involvement should be part of the process for planning and implementing fire restoration programs. The people interviewed in the Bitterroot Social Assessment expressed their needs and made many recommendations for improving the acceptability of management ignited prescribed fire. By building support for their programs, managers can be more successful in meeting prescribed fire management goals. Managers must talk, listen, and respond to the public.

## Talk to the Public About Fire in Ecosystems

**Ecological Facts**—Develop simple ways to present ecological processes and interactions. Field trips, media features, demonstrations, and publications are examples of activities that stimulate interest, interaction, and dialog.

**Benefits**—Help individuals to understand the benefits of fire in ecosystems as it relates to biological diversity and forest sustainability, wildlife populations, and watershed productivity.

**Consequences**—Personal interactions through field trips allow people to see fire relationships and the effects and consequences of fire suppression for themselves. Trade-offs between wildfire and prescribed fires in suburban interface areas with high fuel buildups are particularly important to explore with the public. Proactive management through prescribed fire becomes an important tool for public consideration once its role in reducing risk in interface areas is understood.

**Risks in Implementing Prescribed Burns**—Agencies need to be open and honest about our technical abilities and limitations in prescribed fire management. Much can be gained in public support by taking time to explain goals for prescribed burning projects as well as how burning projects are designed and implemented. But, at the same time, we should acknowledge the risks associated with management ignited prescribed fire, and that the risk of escaped fires can be minimized, but not eliminated.

## Listening to the Public Concerns

It is equally important for managers to acknowledge what we hear from the public. Trust, respect, and credibility develop in relationships when needs and concerns are validated. Validation also occurs when the public is involved in developing goals for restoring fire processes. This involvement needs to occur at both the planning and project levels.

At the planning level, public input will play a key role in identifying levels of prescribed fire that are socially acceptable. Compromise among managers, scientists, and the public will help establish the rate at which fire restoration goals can be achieved at landscape scales.

Involving the public early in designing site specific projects can also improve public support at the project level. Public participation at this level gives managers the opportunity to answer questions related to the technical aspects of implementing a prescribed fire project. Information about goals, expected fire behavior, desirable burning conditions, and monitoring can best be shared with the public through a single project. The awareness gained can result in support for future efforts.

## Be Responsive to Public Concerns

In addition to a poor understanding among members of the public of ecological objectives for using prescribed fire,

managers can, and must, continue to respond to other public concerns—for example, wood fiber utilization and smoke management. Concerns about wood fiber waste can be addressed by ensuring that alternatives that optimize the economic benefits of any available wood fiber are considered. This is already a consideration for many projects where fuels reduction through thinning or commercial harvest is done in conjunction with prescribed burning in order to meet restoration objectives.

Concerns about smoke effects can be mitigated by alerting the public of upcoming burning activities including the purpose, best conditions for ensuring good smoke dispersal, duration, size, and location of projects. Although it is impossible to reach everyone, using local radio, print, and television media can provide broad coverage. In many instances, public interest is enhanced once projects are underway. Contacts made to agency offices can be treated as opportunities to share more about the prescribed fire program, and to gather additional input from concerned or interested citizens.

## Conclusions ---

The goal is to restore ecological health and productivity to forests in the West by the expanded use of fire as a management tool. Active public support is critical to success in reaching this goal. Managers must place a priority on public participation as a key step in planning and implementing a growing prescribed fire program. Social assessments, such as the one completed in the Bitterroot Valley, are tools for understanding public attitudes, concerns, and suggestions regarding prescribed fire programs which, in turn, can lead to effective partnerships in building support.

## Reference ---

Canton-Thompson, Janie, PhD. 1994. Social Assessment of the Bitterroot Valley with Special Emphasis on National Forest Management. USDA Forest Service, Bitterroot National Forest, Stevensville, MT. 221 p.