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Pacific Northwest
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North Central
Research Station

*Synthesizing
Scientific Information
for Fire and Fuels
Project Managers*

The information for this fact sheet was provided by Dr. Dennis Miletich and staff at the National Hazards Center in Boulder, Colorado.

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Fuels planning: Science synthesis and integration, an interagency research/management partnership to support the Ten-Year Fire Plan, led by Russell T. Graham, RMRS, and Sarah M. McCaffrey, NCRS.

Fuels Planning: Science Synthesis and Integration

Social Issues Fact Sheet: 4

Three Critical Topics to Cover When Talking About Hazards

The amount of science applicable to the management of wildfire hazards is increasing daily. In addition, the attitudes of landowners and policymakers about fire and fuels management are changing. These two facts make the task of communicating about wildfire hazards more challenging than ever before. Messages to the public will be more effective if the focus is on (1) potential losses, (2) the chance that losses will take place within a certain amount of time, and (3) how to cut losses. These three keys to communicating about hazards could be thought of as the legs on which a hazards education initiative rests. Without any one of the three legs, an initiative could teeter and collapse.



Communicating with homeowners about the risk of living in an area with heavy fuel loads can be challenging (photo credit: V. Sturtevant).

The Three Critical Topics



1. Describe potential losses.

Generally, people have trouble imagining the impact a hazard could have on their community, home, or workplace, so assisting them with descriptions of the hazard, pictures, scenarios, and computer-based maps can be helpful. The essence

of this task is to overcome people's tendency to believe that it can't happen here or it won't happen to me. The more relevant the description to the audience's situation, the more likely they will pay attention to it. A good communicator can find "the local angle" in any hazard or disaster—even in a far-off land—and work with it.

2. Discuss the odds about when the losses will take place.

Even when people understand that fire could, indeed, happen here, they might still need help accepting that it could happen to them during a relevant timeframe—for example, in the next 10 years or during the lifetime of their mortgage. Almost no one but mathematicians and professional gamblers really understands odds, but most people will want to know the likelihood of a hazard occurring in their neighborhood in an uncomplicated way, and in a smallish number of



years. Probability estimates will not, in themselves, accomplish much with the public, but the information will help present the idea of uncertainty, an important concept for communicating about hazards.

3. Explain how to cut losses.

A person with a clear picture of his or her possible losses will benefit from timely suggestions and directions on how to reduce them. Without these blueprints, people can fall prey to a fatalistic inertia. A number of programs on fire prevention have already been developed that might prove



useful in communicating with homeowners about fire hazards.

Appropriate assistance may take many forms: a list of specific activities for minimizing wildfire risk in the community; a how-to video for homeowners; evacuation guidelines for a school; a business resumption planning process for a corporation or a city government; encouragement and help from a neighborhood emergency response team; or recommended policy changes for a water system.

Other fact sheets in this series will be available in the forthcoming months.

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, and the “golden rule” for communicating fire hazard to people.

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

The Fuels Planning fact sheets are based on preliminary findings. Information from fact sheets will be synthesized in an upcoming publication.