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Fire Social Science Research— Selected Highlights



Assess and Enhance Public Trust

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Relation to Strategic Plan

This work supports the objectives in Portfolio C, Element C1: Public interactions with fire and fuels management.

Background

Trust is a form of social capital, facilitating effective land management, communication and collaboration. Although trust in the Forest Service is at least moderately high for most publics, evidence of a lack of trust and outright distrust has been found in some communities. However, the amount, types, and conditions of trust necessary for effective management to occur remain poorly understood.

Approach

Researchers initiated studies to assess the degree of trust or distrust various publics hold in the Forest Service's ability to manage fire and fire risk. Studies have focused on describing the level of trust the public has in agency decisionmaking, understanding the constituent elements and contributors to trust, and developing tools to monitor and enhance trust while accomplishing resource management objectives. These studies range from the community level to multistate level, and involve rural, wildland-urban interface (WUI), and urban residents. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches have been a hallmark of this work.

Products and Tools

Methods to measure trust and attitudes toward the agency across broad urban public and WUI sectors are being developed. Tools are being developed to model trust issues; quantitatively differentiate segments of rural and WUI communities with high, medium and low trust; understand the contributors to trust; and monitor the effects of public involvement, community-based agency efforts, and collaborative planning activities on trust.

We have developed tools to enhance trust.



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Effective fire management rests in part on trust between publics and managing agencies.

Results and Applications

Trust has been found to be centered in perceived values that are similar or dissimilar between agency and publics, as well as perceived consistency or inconsistency of action with those values and validity of reasons underlying inconsistencies (Cvetkovich and Winter 2007). It has been shown to mediate and reinforce the relationship between values and public support for wildland fire management actions such as thinning and prescribed burning (Liljebld and Borrie 2006; Liljebld et al., in press; Vaske et al. 2007). However, more work is needed to understand the role trust plays in natural resource decisions, and how trust is lost and gained. Some of the basic tenets of trustworthiness (credibility, honesty, similarity) may or may not be the best foci of agency members seeking to build trust. The importance of trust has been demonstrated concerning reliance on, and likelihood of taking action on, information provided by National Predictive Services. Findings from this will be used to make strategic decisions about communication with various segments of the fire management community in the federal and nonfederal sectors.

The Bitterroot Ecosystem Management Project has assessed trust across communities to understand baseline levels of trust, engaged the public in geographic

information system-based values mapping activities to understand the relationship between the public and the Bitterroot National Forest, and will perform postdecision and postimplementation trust monitoring measurements. On the Lewis and Clark National Forest, scientists provided an analysis of the relationship between trust and the principles of high-reliability organizing during public collaboration on a plan for prescribed fire. In Colorado and southern California, results have helped local agencies understand trust issues for WUI residents and assisted community-based fire preparedness communications (e.g., FireWise and Fire Safe Council work, Absher et al. 2006, Cvetkovich and Winter 2007).

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Key Partners

Colorado State University, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana, Forest Service Northern Region: Bitterroot National Forest and Lewis and Clark National Forest, Fort Lewis College, Michigan State University, National Predictive Services, University of Florida, University of Minnesota, University of Montana, Western Washington University

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