
**IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK
FOR GOAL 3 TASK 2
10-YEAR COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY**

**PUBLIC EDUCATION CAMPAIGN ON THE ECOLOGICAL
ROLE OF FIRE AND THE BENEFITS OF FIRE MANAGEMENT**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PREPARED BY PARTNERS IN FIRE EDUCATION

JUNE 2008



Implementation Task: “Further develop and implement a public education campaign such as the National Wildfire Coordination Group (NWCG) *Wildland Fire: A Natural Process* to complement Smokey Bear’s message of fire safety. The campaign will emphasize fire’s natural role in ecosystems and the benefits of fire management to ecosystems and public health and safety.”

Goal 3 Task 2, 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy
Implementation Plan Update

Introduction

Partners in Fire Education (PIFE) was convened in April 2007 by The Nature Conservancy and The Wilderness Society to serve as a broad-based steering committee for Implementation Task 2 under Goal 3 of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy. The steering committee includes members from the federal land management agencies, NWCG working teams involved with public education, states, counties, forest industry, academia and NGO and other stakeholders.

The PIFE steering committee developed a three-part road map to develop a public education campaign: conducting research to learn about current public opinion on fire; using the research to create messages to change public opinion; and, creating a campaign framework and implementation plan. The research, described below, was completed in March 2008, the messages were developed in April and May 2008, and the framework was approved by the PIFE steering committee in June 2008.

Research and Findings

The PIFE steering committee commissioned a two-phased research effort. The first phase was a comprehensive review of existing survey data and secondary sources regarding public attitudes toward fire, and of existing fire education and messaging materials. The second phase was a national quantitative and qualitative survey on attitudes and knowledge about fire's beneficial ecological role, including six focus groups and a national survey with regional oversamples. The goals of the second phase research were to establish a baseline of public attitudes toward fire from which to measure future changes in attitudes, and to craft language and messages that increase public acceptance of an ecological role for fire.

Five Key Public Opinion Research Findings

1. Americans understand that some fires can be beneficial, and that a history of fire suppression has led to more large and destructive fires.
2. At the same time, Americans have a strong negative emotional reaction toward fire: they fear for their safety.
3. The public's understanding of fire's ecological role has increased over the past years.
4. Public concerns about wildfire rank very low compared to other conservation issues.
5. Whatever their level of concern about fire, Americans voice more concern about fire's effects on people, including firefighters, than on fire's effects on ecosystems or nature.

The research found that while Americans have a fairly sophisticated understanding of the ecological role of fire, they do not have much experience with wildfire or fire use and have a strong fear of fire.

- Three-fourths of people agree that “some fires in natural areas are beneficial.”
- Two-thirds of people understand that “putting out all fires in natural areas can create conditions that will make later fires burn faster, hotter and more out of control.”
- Understanding of fire’s ecological role is positively correlated with educational level.
- Fire is viewed by about half the population (53%) as scary, and more women than men feel that “fire is unpredictable and dangerous” compared to a significant 44% who think “forest fires are part of nature.”

Messages about Fire Management Outcomes

The research indicates greater success in communications if outcomes from fire management strategies are described using this wording:

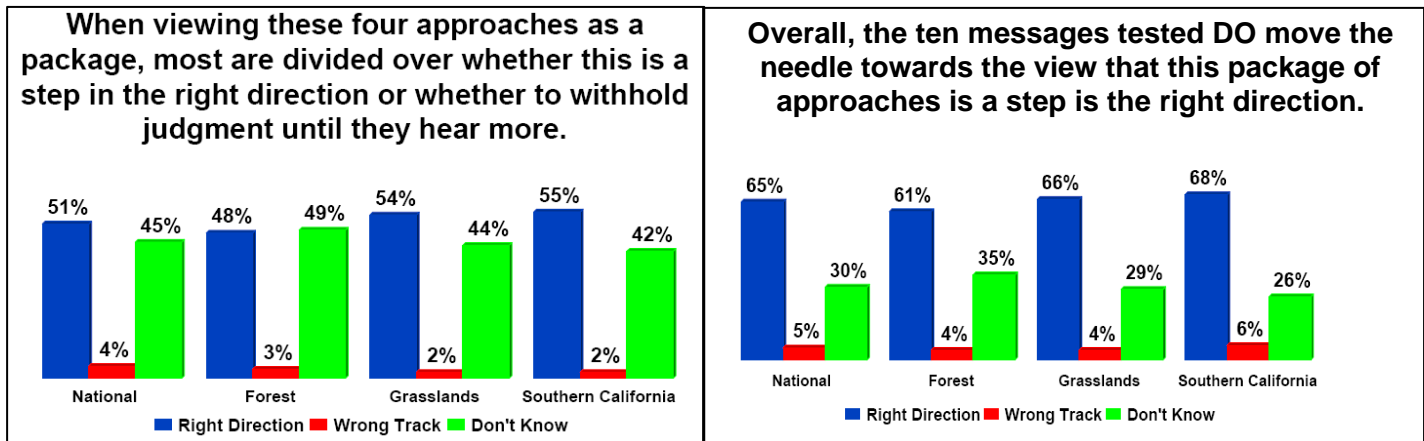
1. Protecting people, property and communities
2. Safeguarding the health and regeneration of natural areas
3. Safely managing controlled burns to clear fuels
4. Saving taxpayer money through controlled burns
5. Protecting our air and water by protecting the health of forests and natural areas, and giving plants and wildlife the exposure to fire they need to survive

The public supports proactive management approaches in fire-prone forests and grasslands. The following approaches were tested in the research:

- **Allow fire teams to use controlled burns when and where doing so will safely reduce the amount of fuel for fires.** 90% support, 52% strongly support
- **Cut and remove overgrown brush and trees in natural areas that act as fuel for fires.** 79% support, 51% strongly support
- **Allow naturally started fires that do not threaten homes, people or the health of that natural area to take their natural course, rather than putting the fire out.** 62% support, 31% strongly support
- **Shift some existing government funds from putting out practically all fires to proactively cutting and removing overgrown brush and trees and using controlled burns to reduce the amount of fuel for fires.** 80% support, 44% strongly

When asked about this package of four management approaches, only 4% said it was on the “wrong track” and 51% said it was going in the “right direction.” However, a significant 45% of respondents said they “did not know.”

After hearing a set of ten messages about fire’s ecological role, safety, cost-effectiveness, and the ways that fire helps keep natural areas healthy for people, 14% of people changed their minds from “don’t know” to in the “right direction.” Women, people in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states were most likely to increase their feeling that these approaches are a step in the right direction.



Communications Highlights

The context for fire communications is challenging. Fire is a low-ranking concern for most people compared to other environmental concerns such as global warming and growth and development. Environmental issues are of less concern than the economy, healthcare and many other issues. Whatever their level of concern about fire, Americans voice more concern about fire’s effects on people, including firefighters, than on fire’s effects on ecosystems or nature. Because of the concern for fire and people, significant media attention is generated during fire season, which may provide an opportunity for strategic communications.

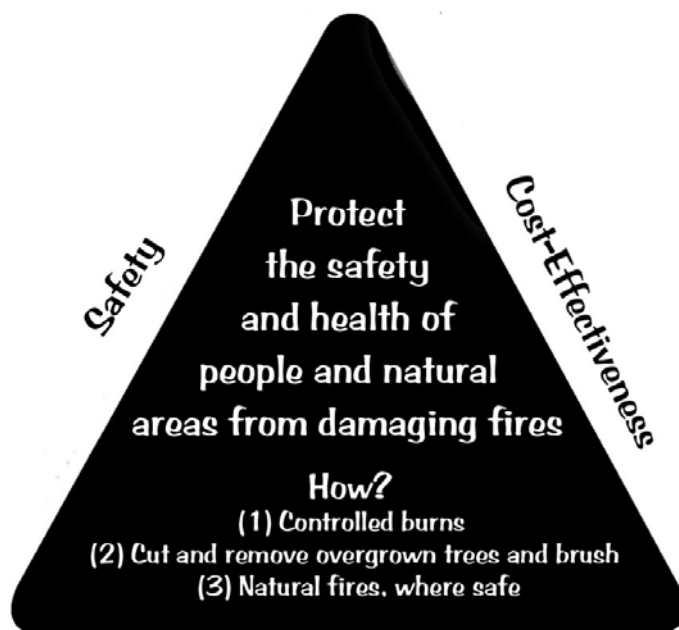
Using trusted messengers for fire communications is critical to success. The research provided a very clear picture about who the public trusts for information about wildfire: firefighters from the front lines with local experience. Messages will be best communicated by park rangers, firefighters, local firefighters and US Forest Service field personnel talking about the value of fire use or management actions and demonstrating how and why they are done.

Specific words and phrases were tested with the public in order to learn what language will effectively communicate about fire use. Some words were better received than others.

<i>Use These Words:</i>	<i>Instead of:</i>
Natural areas	...Wildland, ecosystem or landscape
Homes near natural areas	...Wildland Urban Interface or WUI
Fire teams	...Fire managers or management teams
Controlled burns	...Prescribed fire
Cut/remove overgrown trees/brush	...Mechanical thinning
Manage natural fires where safe	...Wildland Fire Use

Consistent use of simple core messages that reassure the public about safety, emphasize cost-effectiveness, and connect healthy natural areas to benefits for people can be guided by the following message triangle. The triangle is a tool for fire communicators, but is not a graphic to use directly with the public.

Quick Tool for Talking with the Public about Fire



Healthy Natural Areas = Healthy People

The research was used to structure the triangle with broad themes so that communications professionals can more easily use and stick to the language in the triangle. The parts of the triangle follow a logical progression — the core message statement in the center and then a directed progression of the top-tested messages and their proof points. The triangle does not include every single statement that every single messenger is ever going to say. It does provide an exclusive list of the key message themes that every messenger needs to know and the key support points s/he needs to make on the themes' behalf.

Each of the sub-themes in the triangle was derived from the polling data. For example, safety is the top priority for everyone and should be addressed before any other concept is mentioned. The poll showed that 86% of the public found the following argument convincing (and 43% found it very convincing):

“Safety is always the number one priority when it comes to fire. But, by putting out every single fire, we are actually creating more dangerous conditions. Using controlled burns to thin out overgrowth and carefully managing natural fires helps ensure the safety of neighborhoods in outlying areas”

Human health and community benefit is the best way to talk about the ecological impacts of fire management. For example, the regenerative effects of the Yellowstone fires to our most treasured national park are well recognized among the public and effective when used as proof points to demonstrate the benefits of fire to people and natural areas. The following message was convincing to 80% of the public (40% very convincing):

“Forests and natural areas are important to our health - they act as natural filters to give us clean air, and are the source of our clean drinking water. We must ensure the health of our forests and natural areas by allowing some fires to take their natural course.”

Cost effectiveness is also a common concern. This message was convincing to 80% of those polled (41% very convincing):

“Taxpayer money is being wasted putting out fires that are far from people and their property. A far more cost-effective approach is to use controlled burns to prevent large, severe fires from spreading into areas where people live, and to allow some fires to take their natural course, which costs five times less than trying to put out fires.”

Public Education Campaign Proposal

The purpose of a public education campaign is to build support for the National Fire Plan and its four goals: improve fire prevention and suppression, reduce hazardous fuels, restore fire-adapted ecosystems, and community assistance. The knowledge gap identified in the research indicates a strong need for a public education campaign to increase awareness of wildfire and fire use before providing information to build acceptance of management actions that alleviate the problem. The specific and measurable objective of the proposed public education campaign is to move 15-20% of the 45% of people who “don’t know” if they support the current management approach into the group that say the approach is on the “right track.”

Agency acceptance (e.g. federal, state, tribal and local) of the language for communicating with the public about fire and adherence to the simple core message in all communications is essential to succeed with this campaign. Important steps include NWCG acceptance of the tested language, revision of the NWCG glossary, and basic message training for firefighters, field personnel, state foresters, public information officers on fire teams, and other fire communicators.

The research identified the public's preferences for various information sources, such as newspapers, radio ads, websites and brochures. These preferences were used to rank and structure different "modules" and "organizing options" that can be assembled to create a successful educational campaign.

To take the campaign beyond agency acceptance, four campaign modules, each with different advantages, are proposed for adoption as funding allows:

- **Grassroots:** Use a wide range of community venues to disseminate materials developed for audiences in rural America and residents living near fire-prone natural areas.
- **Electronic Media:** Two alternatives- 1) Seek donated television, cable and radio advertising of the message potentially through the Ad Council if selected. Will still require funds to produce PSAs even if time is donated. 2) Buy television, cable and radio advertising of the message. If we buy ads, the Ad Council cannot be involved. Electronic media is effective and expensive.
- **Earned Media:** Stay on message whenever there are earned media opportunities in newspapers, television and radio.
- **New Media:** Develop web sites, videos, blogs and interactive materials to disseminate the message to younger and other target audiences.

Three organizing options are presented to illustrate possible structures for the campaign. The options vary in cost and would be effective in different ways.

Summary of Organizing Options			
	(A) Government-run Program Under NWCG	(B) Independent Paid Campaign	(C) PIFE Extension
Overview	NWCG develops a charter and models the marketing effort after the FIREWISE program	Create an independent paid campaign	Continue current model of an <i>ad hoc</i> coordinating group
Structure	Possible subcommittee of task team under the new NWCG Prevention, Education and Outreach Committee	Hire Campaign Director and staff with a board of agencies and stakeholders	Committee of stakeholders and agencies can report to any of the following: WFLC, WGA or NWCG
Staff	Existing agency staff and new contracts	New staff of paid campaign	Existing staff of NGOs and agencies
Strengths	Structure has a successful track record	Highly focused and effective structure	No start up time because structure exists
Concerns	NWCG's oversight may reduce stakeholder participation from current level through PIFE	Connection to NWCG would be harder to establish and maintain	Heavy work load for people and organizations with collateral duties
Cost	Medium -- \$250-400K/yr in additional staff cost	High -- \$400-800K/yr for staff and office	Low -- \$100K/yr + donated staff time

Description of Campaign Modules				
	Grassroots	Electronic Media	New Media	Earned Media
Objective	Local emphasis to reinforce all other modules	Carry the messaging through TV and radio advertising	Harness power of the internet to spread the message	Earned media as a conduit to get the message to target audiences
Audience	WUI residents, and rural areas and communities with an emphasis on women	TV watchers in poll sub-groups most likely to move, especially women, and WUI residents and forest users	Local communities at risk, educators, NGOs and regionally specific audiences	Newspaper readers including local public officials and policy makers, homeowners and interest groups
Activities	Develop materials for outreach in wide range of community venues, with appropriate timing	Buy television, cable and radio advertising	Develop materials for internet outreach including videos, blogs, quizzes and maps	Consistent press packets, place Op Eds and strategic use of fire season coverage
Partners	Extension services, NACo, local government, federal/state agencies and local organizations	If seeking donated media and no paid media involved- Ad Council	Agencies and NGOs	NGOs, Federal and State agencies
Estimated Unit Costs	\$20-50K to produce a set of multi-purpose message products (video, brochures, etc); \$20K per message training workshop	Alternative 1) If choosing to use only donated media via Ad Council campaign, yearly costs >=\$1M; could receive donated media estimated from \$2 to 30M per year.	\$20-50K to produce message products which can be coordinated with other modules; \$20-30K annual maintenance costs	Module replicates existing approach so earned media does not generate new costs; \$20K per message training workshop
		Alternative 2) the purchase cost for TV/cable/radio range from \$250K/month in Denver to \$40K/ month in Bend. Development of ads can cost \$800K/year		
Expected Outcome Given the Investment	Effective in rural communities; more fire use incorporated in CWPPs	Highly effective at influencing public attitudes but requires very large investment	Reaches new segments of the public that are not reached with current outreach	Existing earned media will be more effective at building public understanding