



United States
Department
of Agriculture

Forest Service

Rocky Mountain
Research Station

Research Note
RMRS-RN-21-3-WWW

September 2004

Fuels Planning: Science Synthesis and Integration

Social Issues Fact Sheet: 3

Developing Personal Responsibility for Fuels Reduction: More Ways to Catch and Hold People's Attention



Pacific Northwest
Research Station



Synthesizing Scientific Information for Fire and Fuels Project Managers

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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.

In other fact sheets, we discuss the different types of information that are useful in explaining to property owners the importance of taking personal responsibility for fuels management on their land. However, for some property owners, new information is not enough—they may need more information in order to understand that change is necessary. In this fact sheet, we discuss ways to catch and hold people's attention so that they become (and stay) engaged in fuels reduction activities.



Catching and Holding People's Attention

Personal relevance and usefulness—You want your message to grab the property owner's attention and be stored in his or her memory, to recall it at the right time. The relevant and useful messages will be most seriously considered. Knowing your audience is critical to making your message personally relevant and useful. More information on the importance of knowing your audience for effective programs will appear in future fact sheets in this series.

Vivid information—Vivid information grabs us emotionally, triggers our imagination, and is immediate in a sensory, temporal, or spatial way. Spice up your text by writing actively: using action verbs, referring to concrete details, tossing in a few colorful adjectives, and when appropriate, including meaningful quotes.

Retrieval cues—Often you are passing along some information that people can't put to use immediately but will need at a later time. The trick is to get them to remember that information at the appropriate time. To help them do that, you can provide cues. An example is getting people to remember the appropriate response to an evacuation order. Using a vivid image when you are conveying the message, such as boxes being carried from a home to a vehicle for evacuation, brings forth a memory of that event and will reinforce your message regarding the evacuation process. By using the same image or cue in diverse media, you can help ensure that your basic message is reinforced and remembered.

Prompts—Cues help people to recall a message to trigger an action at a later time, while prompts remind people of actions to be taken now. Prompts need to be placed as close as possible to the location where the desired behavior will

Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, Wisconsin. Following a windstorm, this property owner recognized the need to improve access to his home. This commitment to action provided the local forester an opportunity to develop a thinning proposal that reduces fuels loads and at the same time widens and straightens the driveway (photo credit: Pam Jakes).

take place. For example, stickers attached to garden tools or trashcans can remind homeowners while they are pruning trees or raking pine needles to dispose of slash or other potential fuels appropriately. A lawn sign can remind neighbors to place their slash on the curb for scheduled community pick-up.

Other Ways to Approach People

Commitment—If you can get a property owner to commit to some behavior or course of action, even if it is small, you will often hook them into the larger program. When people commit to an action it affects the way they perceive themselves. Even doing something as minor as putting a sticker on a window or sign in the lawn will make it more likely that that person will commit to a larger act. That’s because once a person takes action, they begin to see themselves as the kind of person who supports that behavior. This makes it more likely that they will take the next, perhaps bigger, step.

Asking people to do an onerous task and being refused will often allow you to get commitment from them to do a smaller task. These techniques have been widely used in changing behaviors related to energy efficiency, recycling, pedestrian safety, and recreation.

Incentives—Incentives can either reward people for “good” behavior (positive incentives) or punish them

for “bad” behavior (negative incentives). The most successful incentives closely link the incentive with the behavior—for example, reducing home insurance rates for those who create defensible space or offering coupons for purchasing less-flammable plants. Negative incentives are usually less successful than positive incentives because people focus on how to avoid being caught. Pairing incentives with one of the other persuasion techniques discussed above can increase the power of the message. For example, when people sign up for a contest or a raffle they often interpret that as a written commitment to support the broader contest objectives. A prize or other recognition that is publicized among neighbors is effective for those who are motivated by what others think.

Incentives work best for a discrete behavior or a behavior occurring over a short timeframe. It is tricky to use incentives to encourage long-term behavior change because people will expect to continue receiving the incentive as long as they maintain the favored behavior. If the incentive is removed, the desired behavior often stops. Worse still, some people who performed the desired behavior before the incentive was introduced may also stop performing the behavior because they too have linked the behavior to the incentive.

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.