



United States  
Department  
of Agriculture

Forest Service

Rocky Mountain  
Research Station

Research Note  
RMRS-RN-21-8-WWWW

September 2004

## Fuels Planning: Science Synthesis and Integration

### Social Issues Fact Sheet: 8

# The “Golden Rule” and Other Lessons on Communicating About Hazards



Pacific Northwest  
Research Station



North Central  
Research Station

### Synthesizing Scientific Information for Fire and Fuels Project Managers

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

Social Science Team Co-Leads:

**Pam Jakes**

**Sue Barro**

USDA Forest Service  
North Central Research Station  
1992 Folwell Avenue  
St. Paul, MN 55108

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.

This is one in a series of fact sheets on communicating about wildland fire. In other fact sheets, we identified considerations for communicating about hazards, talked about the importance of working locally, and discussed the seven laws of effective hazard communication. In this fact sheet we introduce the “Golden Rule” of hazard communication and share some final lessons from hazard educators.

### The Golden Rule

The “Golden Rule” of communicating about hazards is to **use windows of opportunity**. All the sophisticated materials and behavior modification techniques do not have the force of one catastrophe to change what people think, their behavior, and even public policy, at least in the short term.

During the window of opportunity that opens following a disaster, abundant information from various sources in the affected location will increase the chances for changing what people think and how they behave. This is also the case for people and communities that were not directly impacted by the disaster but experienced it from the mass media.

Use the window of opportunity while you can—the window isn’t open for long and fleeting interest wanes. Typically, even after a big disaster, people will keep the hazard high on their big issues list for only 2 to 3 months.

You don’t need a catastrophe to create a window of opportunity. Windows of opportunity for communicating about hazards also open when a new resident moves into a neighborhood, during Wildland Fire Awareness Week, or any time when people may be open to new information about wildland fire.

### Other Important Lessons

- 1. Partnerships Work Best.** Partnerships work better than any one organization working alone. High-profile, local organizations with established track records are important to include as partners.
- 2. Feature Specialists.** Education programs are more effective if they feature specialists who are experts in the hazard that your education program is about.
- 3. Adapt Materials to Locals.** Adapt and customize information to your audience. For example, if the population you seek to educate has experienced a disaster in recent history, reference it in your materials.
- 4. Use Different Ways to Communicate.** Use many different forms of communication to increase the chances that your message will be heard. For example, you may do a mass mailing to local residents, but putting your message on grocery bags will also help you reach residents and visitors. Be innovative in selecting several ways to reach people.



People are much more apt to pay attention to material they feel has direct reference to their local conditions than material developed for a general audience (complete pictorial guide can be found at: <http://www.firefree.org/ffreenew/PDF/FireResPlants.pdf>).

## 7. Use a Good Mix of the Verbal and the Visual.

Finding the right mix of verbal and visual information about a risk and what the public should think and do about it is not always easy, but it increases the success of public hazards education.



The California Fire Safe Council maintains a Spanish-language Web site to increase accessibility of their materials (their Web site can be found at: <http://www.firesafecouncil.org/spanish>).

**5. Tailor Information for Special Groups.** It is a mistake to assume that any public is homogenous. Public information should be tailored to the many groups in an area.

**6. Use Multiple Languages.** Public hazard education efforts presented in the multiple languages of the community work better than those presented in just one language.

## 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](http://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.*