

Lessons from the Social Science Literature to Inform Wildland Fire and Fuels Management



Social and Economic Dimensions of Ecosystem Management

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Social concerns regarding wildland fire and fuels management are receiving increasing attention as fuels treatments and wildland firefighting move from the wild to our backyards. Social science research has addresses topics of interest to wildland fires and fuels management, with a surge in research with the implementation of the National Fire Plan. In a series of projects, we synthesized existing knowledge from the social science literature that is relevant to this area.

After 4 years of funding from the National Fire Plan, and additional support for social science research related to wildland fire from other sources, it is time to take stock to (1) see where we have been in order to (2) identify knowledge gaps that might serve as promising areas of research for the future.

We supported two efforts to synthesize what we currently know about wildfire and fuels management from a social science perspective. In the first effort, we identified knowledge available to answer the following questions:

1. What information and tools are available that help land managers and communities collaborate in developing fuel treatment programs?
2. What information and tools are available to help public land managers work with communities to communicate the risk and uncertainty of fuels treatment projects?
3. What information and tools are available to evaluate the social acceptability of fuels treatments?
4. What information and tools are available to encourage more active involvement of private property owners in the fuels management process?
5. What information and tools are available to help us understand and evaluate the social impacts of wildfire?

We found that although research on wildfire related to these five questions is extremely limited, there is general social science information available that answers each question. For example, there are numerous studies that look at the role of collaboration in natural resource management. While these studies do not look specifically at collaboration in wildland fire management, there are lessons to be learned from the natural resource and collaboration literature for wildland fire and fuels management. There is a long history of research on communicating the risk and uncertainty of natural hazards. Wildland fire is a natural hazard, and some of the findings from research on earthquakes, floods, and other natural hazards can inform wildland fire and fuels management.

In the second synthesis project, we looked at what the literature tells us about community preparedness for wildland fire. Much of the literature on community preparedness for wildland fire has taken place since the implementation of the National Fire Plan. Over the past five years there has been a remarkable growth in the number of qualitative case studies highlighting what individual communities are doing to increase preparedness. This data has been organized around themes such as steps in the decision-making process and key elements for success. Scientists are beginning to use this data to develop theories to explain community preparedness.

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Caption—Communities are taking a variety of actions to improve wildland fire preparedness, from enacting codes, standards, and zoning that restrict develop or mandate fuels reduction to demonstration projects to educate homeowners about fuels management



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