

Fire Management and Forest Conditions: Public Acceptance in the Great Lakes Region

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ISSUE

Fire managers are concentrating forest health and fuel reduction treatments at the wildland-urban interface where problems are the most severe and risk is eminent, yet little is known about public opinion of agency forest policies in the Great Lakes region.

OBJECTIVES

This study's overall objective is to evaluate public opinion about forest conditions and fuel reduction treatments planned or underway on National Forests in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Specific research objectives were designed to:

- Examine citizen's understanding of forest conditions and fuels management (in general) and the range of specific treatments practiced or being considered in the region.
- Measure public preferences for a range of fuels reduction and restoration practices.
- Examine existing relationships among the public and natural resource agencies and measure public confidence in managers ability to effectively implement fuel reduction and restoration programs.
- Identify how citizens view various sources of information related to natural resources, including the credibility of information and which delivery systems are most useful.

RESULTS

- Interviews with local Forest Service fire management personnel were used to design a mail survey that in 2002 was sent to a random sample of residents of counties adjacent to National Forests in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. 593 responses were received resulting in a 53% response rate.
- Findings help expose the complexity of fire management and fuel reduction problems and reinforced the importance of a sound communication process.
- Three themes emerged in the findings as deserving individual consideration: **understanding of forest conditions, fire management and treatment alternatives**, and **citizen-agency interactions**.

Understanding of Forest Conditions

- Nearly half (49%) of those surveyed have land adjacent to a forest or natural area where a wildfire may occur, and a slight majority (51%) thought a wildfire near their home in the next five years was likely.
- Interactive forms of information exchange (field trips, interpretive centers, and personal conversations) with forest agency personnel were rated as being *understandable, trustworthy, and helpful*.
- Citizens were generally familiar with terms and current issues, but specific knowledge was considerably lower. Uncertainty and misperceptions were common about key fire-related terms and concepts.

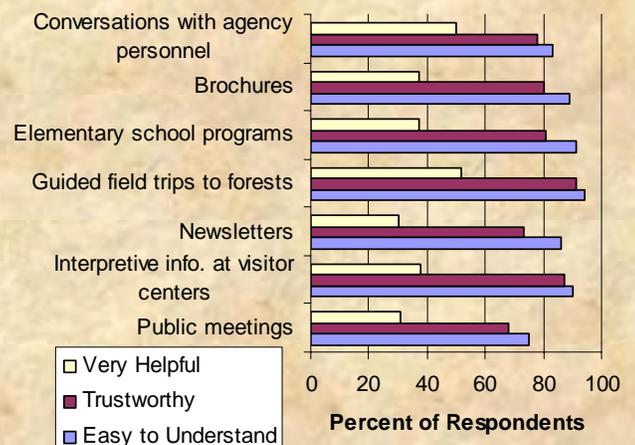


Figure 1. Assessment of public forest agency information sources.

Fire Management and Treatment Alternatives

- The two issues of greatest importance to respondents were managing health forests and communicating with the public.
- One-third of all respondents agreed with the statement “all fires, regardless of origin, should be put out as soon as possible;” another 18% were uncertain.
- Beliefs about the effectiveness of fuel management practices was mixed.
- Thinning received the most support for fuel reduction purposes, with 59% agreeing that resource managers should be able to use it whenever they see fit. Mechanical vegetation removal received 50% agreement. Citizens were most cautious about prescribed fire, with only 38% agreeing managers should use it when they see fit.

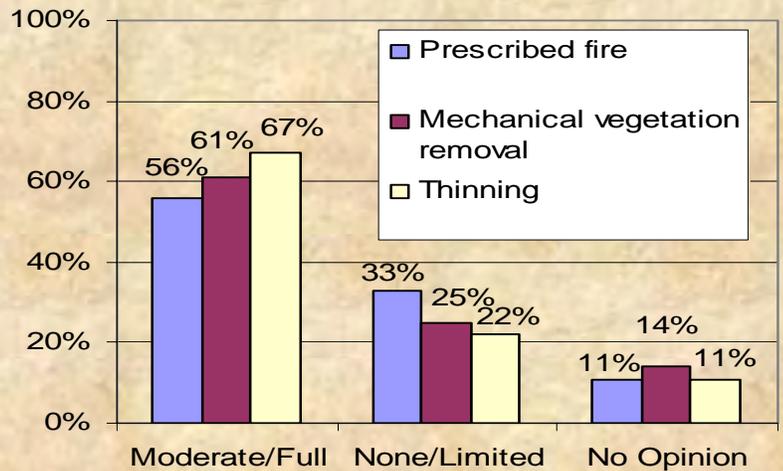


Figure 2. Confidence in Forest Service to use fuel management practices in a responsible and effective manner.

Citizen-Agency Interactions

- One-third (34%) of respondents believe the Forest Service does an excellent or good job incorporating public concerns into management strategies. One-third (32%) believe the Forest Service does a fair job, and 14% indicated poor. 20% of respondents had no opinion.
- The majority of respondents (53%) believed that citizen participation in forest planning is of substantial value even if it adds to the cost of government.
- Respondents were most trusting of the Forest Service in relation to other forest organizations (timber companies, tribes) and local agencies (city, county, and state government).

Table 1. Opinions about Forest Service interactions with local communities.

Statement	Agree
The Forest Service is open to public input and uses it to shape management decisions.	25%
Forest Service managers usually create plans without input from local communities.	34%
Forest Service managers build trust and cooperation with citizens so that people feel the agency is acting in their best interest.	23%
The Forest Service does a good job of providing information about its management activities.	27%
The Forest Service should provide a stronger leadership role.	46%
Local Forest Service staff are prohibited from doing their job because of national restrictions or regulations.	31%

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Four key recommendations developed from this research that are intended to help guide agency personnel and citizens toward improving conditions in forest communities.

- **Build literacy among communities.**
- **Address uncertainty and risk.**
- **Focus on situational context and site-specific conditions.**
- **Concentrate on agency-public interactions along with information provision.**

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