
“We’ve made huge improvements in how we address firefighter safety. It has been painfully slow, though. All things are doable over time; it’s just the speed of change that is difficult. We will change over time, but do we want to wait 20 years and sustain the 20 firefighter deaths per year and increasing public deaths?”

—Type 1 Incident Commander, Society Focus Group

A 10-year review of accidents and incidents within the USDA Forest Service wildland fire system.

USDA Forest Service photo by Jace Jacobs.
Abstract

This document seeks to describe the wildland fire system and culture within which U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service employees operate. To do so, this review presents a narrative of the Forest Service's wildland fire system based on the opinions, experiences, and perspectives of those who operate within it.

Non-discrimination statement

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339.

Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint_filing_cust.html and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: program.intake@usda.gov.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender.

Disclaimer

Reference herein to any specific commercial products, process, or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise, does not necessarily constitute or imply its endorsement, recommendation, or favoring by the United States Government. The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the United States Government, and shall not be used for advertising or product endorsement purposes.
Chapter 7. Socio-Political Pressures: Real and Perceived

“Fire is a social problem. Fire is not a problem if people aren’t around. It only becomes a problem when people are around.”
—Regional Fire Director, Society Focus Group

The 2007–2016 metareview qualitative analysis found the expectations partner agencies, stakeholders, and the public have for Forest Service firefighting resources can be drastically different than what those firefighting resources or the agency perceive them to be. Focus group participants reinforced this observation, stating in some cases expectations have been much higher and, in others, much lower than what agency personnel believed them to be.

“I asked them, ‘Well, do you want your son or daughter on that hillside?’, and they said, ‘Yeah.’ They felt that firefighters are just like soldiers. They should be putting their life on the line. I had to walk away.”
—District Ranger, Society Focus Group

“As a Type 1 IC, I’ve seen them not want to take risk to protect their home.”
—Forest Fire Management Officer, Society Focus Group

Dr. Sara McCaffrey, the academic presenter for the society focus group, further supported this observed trend when she presented research suggesting socio-political pressures are not so clear cut; some of these pressures are real while others are merely perceived. Dr. McCaffrey referred to these perceived pressures as “false narratives,” a state in which fire managers or the agency may be hesitant to use certain management strategies because of pressure they assume to be real but that may not actually be representative of the greater population they serve.

This tension between real and perceived pressures was highlighted in real time during the society focus group when, after Dr. McCaffrey presented some of her findings, a focus group participant (regional fire director) responded by expressing their disbelief in the numbers:

“What is the source of this data? I see that number, and my BS flag is flying up the pole right now. It’s just not what I have seen.”

Participants speculated these false narratives are likely perpetuated by personal experience with the few loud voices in the room. Often these few loud voices garner the most attention, but by engaging with only those voices, agency personnel may sometimes project those expectations onto the rest of the community.

“We tend to make a number of assumptions about the public but there is no ‘the public’; there are just people, and people are diverse and complicated. It’s all about assumptions and stereotypes, right? It’s what we think of as ‘the public.’ But we know the public is so many different people and so many different opinions that it really is complicated.”
—District Ranger, Society Focus Group
This gap also exists in the understanding our partners and the public have of the work the fire organization actually does compared to what they imagine the work they do is. Not telling the story of agency resources and their mission leaves partners and the public to develop their own understanding of what the Forest Service’s fire resources do. Left to their imagination, it is clear to see how the public’s, our cooperators’, and our agency partners’ perceived expectations can be far off from the agency’s real duties.

Insights from focus group participants provided some useful clues as to where some of this misalignment between real and perceived pressures and expectations may stem from:

- Educating rather than listening—having a monologue with the public rather than a dialogue.
- Not telling the story of the fire organization or the agency.
- Using broad-brush narratives rather than geographically localized narratives.
- Differences in national, regional, and local perceptions of public opinion and expectations.

In addition to the challenges discussed already, there are also practical barriers that stand in the way of developing these relationships and partnerships—it takes time, resources, and energy to implement. All are things which most employees don’t have much of to spare.

Being understaffed and underfunded, most participants spoke of putting a majority of their time and resources into accomplishment-oriented tasks rather than on building relationships. Because the agency reports to Congress, meeting targets has started to feel like the primary mission for agency employees. One participant, a district ranger, spoke of putting more effort into building relationships within their unit’s community after experiencing a bad fire season, saying:

> “I have a lot of coffee meetings with the public, and my own staff criticize me for having coffee meetings because it is not an output. In my next letter of direction, I’m going to say that ‘You spend four hours every pay period having a relationship conversation.’ I might get in trouble for that. It’s not a log on a truck.”

Most focus group conversations reinforced the social science literature around the importance of knowledge, trust, and interactive communication. As Dr. Sarah McCaffrey, the academic presenter for the society focus group, noted, “We tend to approach communication with the public as a matter of educating them, but assuming the role of ‘educator’ can put us in an inherently asymmetrical power dynamic with the people we are attempting to communicate with.” Rather than fostering true dialogue and interactive communication, our efforts to “educate” the public sometimes promote a one-way information flow that inhibits rather than fosters opportunities for learning and real collaboration. So how can the fire organization better understand where the public is coming from, get into their shoes, and try to figure out where we can find common ground?

This challenge with communication is not unique to the Forest Service. As Edgar Schein, scholar and researcher of organizational culture, suggests in “Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling”: “We value task accomplishment over relationship building and either are not aware of this cultural bias or, worse, don’t care and don’t want to be bothered
with it.” Schein further asserts, “We must become better at asking and do less telling in a culture that overvalues telling.”

Moving Forward as Engagers and Educators

“There is misalignment across jurisdictions. The Forest Service really struggles with that. The State is easy; it’s all suppression. But the Forest Service has this more complex fire paradigm. We know that, but society doesn’t know that. There needs to be a coming together that agencies have to have with each other, to tap some appreciation for what others are doing and coordinate... There is definitely a leap we need to make in the shared stewardship sense about, ‘OK, now we’ve talked to each other, now how do we engage society?’”

—Cooperator, Society Focus Group

Participants across all focus groups agreed the solution to dealing with these real and perceived social and political pressures lies not in placing blame on external sources, but in building trusting relationships with them through interactive communication so that a shared understanding can be developed.

Participants suggested finding more ways to engage key stakeholders would be a big first step in the right direction. Bringing the public and cooperators into the risk tradeoff analysis or coming up with a shared vision of what fire on the landscape looks like are just two ideas participants recommended for increasing engagement. By involving key stakeholders in planning, fire management personnel can gain strong voices in their communities who can speak the language and convey rationale to their own stakeholder groups. To have those key members as a voice for the Forest Service within the community can be an incredibly powerful tool in aligning real and perceived expectations.

Focus group discussions also converged on the importance of annual collaborative spatial planning with partners and cooperators. Fire does not recognize jurisdictional lines, and participants suggested that planning for fire management and fuels projects should also be blind to these lines. Being transparent about forest-level planning and working together with adjacent cooperators and partners to build cross-jurisdictional expectations could help establish a common operating picture. Having this shared understanding prior to a fire ever starting can help ensure objectives for fire management are more effectively built, and in a timely fashion.
“We routinely think about fire in a vacuum, and it is always just the Forest Service talking amongst themselves...We need to create a metaframe of the problem that all the stakeholders see. Until we have meetings that are more than just the Forest Service, I don’t think we’re going to get anywhere.”

—Research Forester, Society Focus Group

How the fire organization structures planning processes is another example of a tangible way the agency can work to build trust. One cooperator participating in the society focus group suggested that the fire organization needs to bring more consistency to its planning process and to ask the questions: “Do the current planning processes build understanding and trust and is the fire organization in service to those goals?” Using such items as metrics for success on projects could go a long way to enhancing relationships with various stakeholders.

From Aspiration to Reality

No doubt, moving from educator to engager is easier said than done, but applying Edgar Schein’s theories of developing a sense of humble inquiry, honing the agency’s listening skills, and becoming genuinely interested in learning from the other’s perspective could be a good place to start. Focus group participants agreed that building trust with the public, stakeholders, cooperators, and partner agencies through mutual understanding and effective dialogue is absolutely necessary moving forward.

“I do think the...three themes of building understanding, trust, and utilizing interactive communications are fundamentally effective, right? If we invest in those things, we can get better outcomes, both from an organizational kind of decision making/risk management standpoint, and from a societal standpoint in terms of what communities then do in terms of how they take ownership...and how [they] understand, mitigate, and manage their risks.”

—Cooperator, Society Focus Group
Learning Challenge

Gather your work group and discuss the following situation which is a continuation of the scenario presented in the learning challenge in chapter 6, “Telling Our Story.”

It is 3 weeks later, the lightning fire has grown considerably but is still, overall, doing “nothing but good.” Crews have prepped and burned out along a road to protect a communication site and a popular trail has been closed to the public. A helicopter was used to support the burnout. Dense smoke has been settling into your community every night. You are at the grocery store again and the same person sees you and approaches, “I thought you said it was a good fire? Doesn’t look good to me. This smoke is horrible!”

Q How do you respond?

Q Did your response show a commitment to listening and building trust rather than telling?

Q How do you think your community views the fire? Where does your perception of how your local community views fire come from?

Q What can you do to listen, build trust, and establish quality relationships with your local community members before there is smoke in the air?

Q Have you experienced instances where community members spoke up to support fire management efforts? How was their perspective received by their fellow community members?

The regional office has received numerous calls from the public, a TV news station, and a staffer from the Governor’s office. The local Air Quality Board has issued a health advisory for your area. The regional office public affairs officer calls your district to inform you that the Governor is “very interested in how you are suppressing your fire.”

Q How do you respond?

Q What kind of support or opposition to managing fire do you expect to have (or have experience with already) in your area? What could be done before there is smoke in the air to gain the support of local and State government officials for management practices that might impact communities?

Tell us about your experience participating in this challenge at this team learning link!
Endnotes


4  **Public Law 107–203.** 107th Congress. (24 July 2002)


7  **U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2015.** The rising cost of wildfire operations: effects on the Forest Service’s non-fire work. 16 p.


