Quick-Guide #7: Crafting Effective Messages to Inspire Community Participation

One persistent challenge to recruiting community residents to participate in wildfire mitigation activities is persuading residents that doing so is in their self-interest. To the surprise and dismay of many wildfire mitigation specialists and land managers, community residents often don't respond to the messages specialists use. For example, one common way to incite residents to act is the threat of property loss from wildfire. Losing one's home to wildfire may be a concern to some residents, but, as many specialists will attest, many other residents are ambivalent to the prospect.

One way to think about this issue is that wildfire specialists, land managers, and community residents have different frames of reference for how wildfire will affect the community. Understanding the diversity of frames that community residents have can better help specialists recruit community residents.

Findings from social science research sponsored by the Joint Fire Science Program indicate that there are several different frames that can be effectively used to recruit community residents. These include:

Personal safety: In many wildland-urban interface communities, overly dense forest conditions, fire suppression, and poor road access pose serious threats to residents' safety during a fire event. While many residents in these communities expect emergency response services to protect them from fire, specialists have the opportunity to educate residents about how these conditions would compromise wildfire suppression and evacuation and, therefore, the safety of homeowners. On-site neighborhood tours provide an opportunity for specialists to identify which homes, if any, will be defended by firefighters.

Loss of property: The prospect of losing one's home and valuable personal belongings can be a strong motivator to act. Fire behavior models, in particular, can demonstrate how properties might be affected in the event of a fire.

Privacy: Many people move into the forest for seclusion and privacy – to "get away from it all." Removing trees for wildfire risk mitigation can compromise these values, leading to residents' resistance and opposition. It is important for specialists to understand this sentiment and work with homeowners to examine the trade-offs between leaving overly dense stands and the possibility of having those stands burn in the fire. Photographs of homes standing amidst a charred landscape can be effective in getting residents to rethink their conception of privacy once the trees are gone.

What is a "normal" forest: Many people living in the wildland-urban interface moved there recently. What they see out their dining room window is often regarded as the way things always were. If available, historical photographs of forest conditions prior to widespread human settlement and fire suppression can be effective in reframing residents' understanding of what constitutes a "normal" forest adapted to fire. (over)
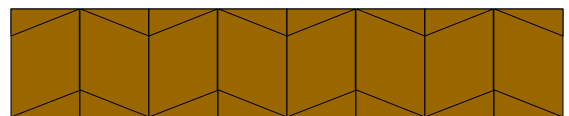
Sense-of-place: A wildfire event can be a severe disruption to an individual's family and/or cultural history and values in the place they live, work, and play. Many of these sense-of-place values may never be replaced after a wildfire. Residents can be encouraged to identify and explore these values vis-à-vis wildfire when identifying values-at-risk in the CWPP, especially when meeting at a location within the neighborhood or community.

Personal responsibility: Society in general has grown accustomed to the prospect that, in a fire event, a government entity will protect their families, homes, and surroundings. With tightening budgets and the increased chances of large wildfires in many areas, government agencies simply lack the ability to meet these expectations. Similar to personal safety, specialists have the opportunity to demonstrate with on-site tours how emergency response services may not be able to offer these protections due to a variety of factors, and that a portion of this protection falls on the shoulders of the residents.

Community responsibility: An individual resident's mitigation actions may not be sufficient to protect values-at-risk if neighboring residents do nothing. Using on-site tours, GIS maps, and fire behavior models, specialists can demonstrate how the effectiveness of wildfire mitigation increases when all homeowners conduct mitigation activities.

Protection of natural values: People move into the forest not only to "get away from it all" but to live in close proximity to natural settings and resources. Forest scenery and wildlife are two natural values community residents often express as primary reasons why they like living in the forest. Specialists can draw on post-wildfire photographs and studies documenting the impact to local wildlife. Specialists should also accentuate potential positive post-wildfire effects on regeneration and wildlife to provide a complete picture of wildfire effects.

Funding: When a community has a CWPP, it generally increases the opportunities for funding through grants and assistance programs to implement projects. Specialists can provide a list of potential funding opportunities and dollar amounts to residents who may be interested in taking mitigation actions, but may feel inhibited by costs.

Some strategies to improve the effectiveness of framing messages to motivate community residents include:

Conduct a community assessment: Questionnaires, focus groups, or individual interviews can produce information about the suite of values residents have for living where they are and form the basis for values-at-risk in the CWPP. This information can also generate ideas of what frames might be most effective to motivate residents.

Develop a communications strategy around the messages and frames: Identify individuals who can communicate these frames to different segments of the community, capitalizing on the relationships and networks these individuals have within the community. HOA leaders, fire chiefs, county extension agents, and state and federal agency personnel may be contributors to developing and implementing a communications plan.

Identify where residents can plug into the CWPP process: Opportunities include identifying values-at-risk, prioritizing treatment areas, community education, and implementation coordination among fellow residents.

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