

## Managing the Unexpected in Public Outreach for Fire and Fuels Management

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The urgency, complexity, and contentiousness of fire and fuels management, in the Northern Rockies and across the West, have signaled the need for increased public outreach by wildland fire management organizations. Public outreach can help to inform and engage the public in management decisions, but at the same time many unexpected events can occur when conducting public outreach, such as contentious public meetings, withdrawal of key publics from participation, harassment of personnel within the organization, and litigation. To reduce the likelihood of such events occurring and to maximize the benefits of public outreach, wildland fire management organizations need some framework to guide their outreach efforts. Social scientists from the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute drew upon the work of Weick and Sutcliffe (*Managing the Unexpected: Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity*, 2001) and their theory on managing with mindfulness to develop and test a potential framework to meet this need.



**Public outreach conducted for the South Fork of the Sun River Prescribed Burn was used as a case study in the research.**

### **Five Central Mindfulness Processes**

- 1) Recognize potential barriers to accomplishment of management objectives**
- 2) Resist simplification of information or interpretations**
- 3) Ensure situational awareness of events as they occur**
- 4) Be prepared to respond to and recover from unexpected events**
- 5) Call upon appropriate expertise in decision-making and management efforts**

The framework includes five central mindfulness processes that can be applied to planning and conducting public outreach: 1) recognize potential barriers to accomplishment of management objectives, 2) resist simplification of information or interpretations, 3) ensure situational awareness of events as they occur, 4) be prepared to respond to and recover from unexpected events, and 5) call upon appropriate expertise in decision-making and management efforts. Scientists tested the usefulness and applicability of the framework using, as a case study, the USDA Forest Service's (USFS) public outreach

efforts conducted during the planning and implementation of the South Fork of the Sun River Prescribed Burn (a multi-phase operation being implemented in the Scapegoat Wilderness, Montana). If the framework could be used to document and understand the effectiveness of the agency's public outreach, then it may be useful in making future efforts related to fire and fuels management more effective.



**Interaction with the media is an important consideration when managing the unexpected in public outreach.**

In-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of agency representatives on the Lewis and Clark National Forest and non-agency public representatives from local communities (primarily Choteau and Augusta, Montana) who were aware of and/or participated in this public outreach (e.g., private landowners, outfitter/guides, local recreationists, non-governmental organization representatives, etc.) to document the agency's efforts. In the interviews,

both agency and public representatives discussed at length such things as public meetings, newspaper articles, one-on-one contacts with private landowners, internal agency briefings, informational mailings, briefings to key publics (county commissioners, governor's staff, media), and other such efforts utilized by the agency.

Analysis of these specific actions used by the agency and perceptions of their effectiveness provided insight into the applicability of the five central mindfulness processes. For example, public representatives acknowledged the value of the agency's efforts to engage the public early on in the planning of the prescribed burn, which indicated the agency recognized and responded to a possible barrier to accomplishment of its public outreach objectives. Through the framework, it was also possible to document and understand how some actions or inactions by the agency could have benefited from more attention to the mindfulness processes. For example, some public representatives felt that specific personal concerns were not addressed by the agency, which indicated the agency might have simplified some information received through public outreach. Thus, use of the framework provided the agency with information on how it might continue to foster or improve its mindfulness when conducting public outreach for fire and fuels management.

#### **Ensure Situational Awareness of Events as They Occur**

*"They were putting out press releases. They had obviously done studies, and they had those documents out for public review. And they had, I want to say that they had information available in the Augusta Information Station if people wanted to come in and get fact sheets on it. They had their personnel available at any time for people to call ... They weren't just touching the Choteau Acantha as media, they were also, there were stories being published in the Great Falls Tribune, and I am almost certain that there were stories published in the Helena newspaper, although I didn't ever read any of those. But I think they were trying to reach as many people as they could. Particularly with this project, it seemed to me that they made a really big effort to do a really good job in informing people about what was going on."*

**- Public Representative**

**Be Prepared to Respond to and Recover from Unexpected Events**

*“Well, we were surprised by the (burn) window. And so, we can plan saying, oh, we’re going to give 72 hours advance notice (to the public), and we didn’t have 72 hours. We, ourselves only had 48 or 24 to 48 hours saying we’re going to ignite ... And I think, essentially, as far as the burn went and the public involvement, because we had done so much prework ... The media was ready to go when we said we were going to burn, and we did get active involvement of reporters and the TV stations and had good stories on KGPR and the radio stations and the TV stations. I think the prework went well, and I think that caused a lot less controversy. And because we did have public notification it wasn’t a surprise.”*

- Agency representative

This research provides an example of a framework that can be used to document and understand the effectiveness of an organization’s outreach efforts. As a case study, the methods and results of the research provide a means of comparison to additional cases and a tool for other land management agencies and units. Just as it was used in this study to evaluate and improve upon the USFS’s (specifically the Lewis and Clark National Forest’s) public outreach efforts, the framework of mindfulness processes can be similarly utilized by other wildland fire management organizations to guide their performance in planning and conducting public outreach for similar fire and fuels management projects.

The results from this research were presented to fire and fuels scientists and managers at the 1st Fire Behavior and Fuels Conference: Fuels Management – How to Measure Success and are detailed

in the article, “Organizational characteristics that contribute to success in engaging the public to accomplish fuels management at the wilderness/non-wilderness interface,” published in the conference proceedings. The research results were also presented to Public Information Officers at the 2006 Northern Rockies Incident Management Teams Meeting and to Public Affairs Officers at the 2006 Northern Region Public Affairs Conference. The final project report is available online at: <http://leopold.wilderness.net/unpublished/UNP110.pdf>

**The Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute is the only Federal research group entirely focused on wilderness in the United States. The Leopold Institute is administered by the USDA Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, but it operates under an agreement between the USDA Forest Service and the USDI Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, Geological Survey, and National Park Service. Research conducted at the Institute is aimed at accomplishing two goals: 1) To develop the knowledge needed to protect and preserve wilderness and the ecological and social values derived from wilderness, and 2) To communicate and apply this knowledge to the wilderness management agencies and other user groups. More information about the Leopold Institute staff, research program, research projects, and publications can be accessed from the website: <http://leopold.wilderness.net>**

