



Complicated Fires Require Simple Message

By Josh McDaniel
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April, 2009. -- Many fire information officers can probably recite a long list of instances where the media got it wrong on a fire, but overall there appears to be a shift in how the media are reporting on fire—and that shift is in the right direction.



Media reporting on fire has improved in recent years as fire information specialists have made an effort to educate reporters on the realities of wildland fire management. Photo: NIFC

Two years ago, I caught a CNN report on the Zaca Fire outside of Santa Barbara. There were the normal dramatic shots of crown fires, retardant drops, and evacuations, but I was struck by the content of the report. The CNN reporter explained that the fire managers on the Zaca were taking different strategies on different flanks of the fire, essentially allowing one of the flanks to burn into wilderness and aggressively suppressing a flank that was threatening smaller communities. CNN got it right! I was amazed by the depth and accuracy of the story. The reporter never used the terms Appropriate Management Response or Fire Use, or any of the other unfortunate terms that have come down the pike in wildland fire, but the message was clear—the Zaca was a complicated fire and the managers were tackling the fire with a common sense approach.

Others in the wildland fire community have noticed the shift as well. Bill Halainen, a retired National Park Service employee, did an informal analysis of regional newspaper coverage of the Gunbarrel and LeHardy Fires which burned in and around Yellowstone National Park in the summer of 2008—the 20th anniversary of the '88 Yellowstone fires. Halainen noted the striking differences in the coverage of the fires compared to twenty years ago (Yellowstone newspaper analysis). He writes:

“The change in 2008 is extraordinary. I saw no polarization or even any real opposition to natural fire. Moreover, reporters were much, much more educated in fire management policies and practices, showing a real understanding (and curiosity) about what was going on with the LeHardy and Gunbarrel fires. This is undoubtedly the result of both policy refinements and two decades of continued education on fire management. Both understanding and support are broad-based.”

Halainen is noting that an emphasis on fire education and outreach is paying off.

Ken Frederick, a public affairs specialist for the BLM, says that with the prevalence of information available online now people are demanding more and better information about the fires.

Fire information specialists are challenged in communicating multiple objective wildland fire management. Photo: NIFC.



“Ten percent love you no matter what, ten percent hate you no matter what, and eighty percent just want information,” says Frederick. “When you give people thoughtful answers and explanations, they might not like it, but they get it—and they respect honest explanations.”

Despite the progress, there is still a ways to go.

Deb Schweizer is a fire education specialist at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks in California. Schweizer says that in the part of California where she works people have experience with fire, both negative and positive. Many have lived through the scary WUI fires in southern California, and many are also familiar with the Parks’ use of fire for resource management, in terms prescribed fire and fire use. However, communication with the media and the public is still a challenge during events.

Schweizer’s communication skills were put to the test by the Tehipite and Hidden fires of 2008. The Tehipite ignited in July, 2008 and burnt mostly in wilderness area. The Hidden Fire, on the other hand, burnt close to one of the gateway communities for the park, and required full suppression.

Schweizer says that on both fires she talked about the different techniques that were being used on different flanks, and how the fire was being managed for multiple objectives, and the public and the media didn’t really pick up on the change in language.

“The media and the public didn’t really notice that there was a difference in how we talked about fire. On the Tehipite, some of the reporters said we were trying to catch it and others said we were managing for resource benefit,” says Schweizer. “But, that is the challenge—how do we talk about managing for multiple objectives.”

She says that there is a real need for all agencies to “get on the same sheet of music” when it comes to fire communication, and use similar terminology and have a clear message.

Roberta D'Amico, the NPS national program lead for fire communication and education, agrees that interagency cooperation on communication is important, but says that there is a stronger need to just keep it simple. "With policy implementation so many are losing track of the need to just tell the public the basics," she says.

Even though fire management is becoming more complex—bigger and more intense fires, an expanding WUI, declining resources, etc.—people's understanding of those challenges is increasing as well. And, as long as long as everyone in the fire community remains committed to educating the public on fire, that situation will improve.

So, are you up to the challenge of tackling the fire message with common language?

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