A Practical Guide To Citizen-Agency Partnerships

Public Outreach Strategies for Fire and Fuel Management

Bruce Shindler
Ryan Gordon
Department of Forest Resources
Oregon State University

A companion to the video program Communication Strategies for Fire Management: Creating Effective Citizen-Agency Partnerships

Communication Strategies
for Fire Management
Creating Effective Citizen-Agency Partnerships

This Practical Guide is a companion to the video program *Communication Strategies for Fire Management: Creating Effective Citizen-Agency Partnerships.* The video is designed to assist land management personnel in working collaboratively with citizens for community fire and fuel reduction strategies. The DVD uses real world examples from successful agency communication programs to highlight effective approaches. It examines essential attributes for developing partnerships and offers a set of organizing principles to initiate an outreach strategy or to improve an existing one. This guide goes further by outlining important steps for implementation.

To obtain a copy of the DVD, contact Dr. Bruce Shindler at Bruce.Shindler@oregonstate.edu.

Acknowledgements

**National
Fire
Plan**

OSU
Oregon State
UNIVERSITY

Fire and fuel management has become an increasingly prominent—and often controversial—issue on federal, state, and private lands across the United States. This is especially true at the wildland-urban interface where private property joins public lands. Resource professionals face the essential task of developing management strategies that protect forest health, address the concerns of local citizens, and encourage property owners to take responsibility for fuel reduction activities.

For fire professionals, engaging the public can be a challenging experience—one that may even seem beyond the initial scope of the "fire job"—but it can also be a useful and rewarding part of the job. Successful interactions can lead to enduring community-agency partnerships for accomplishing fuel management objectives. When maintained over the long-run, these partnerships may also serve as essential components of planning and implementing a range of management actions.

Every management unit faces unique challenges in its efforts to develop an effective fire and fuel management program. There is no single formula for building a public outreach program or establishing a partnership in your community, but the steps outlined here can substantially contribute to your success. This Practical Guide is designed to complement the video program *Communication Strategies for Fire Management: Creating Effective Citizen-Agency Partnerships*. The video showcases first-hand experience and practical ideas from managers working at the ground level. This guide provides more detail about the specific tools and strategies. It is organized in a straight-forward, stepwise approach to implementing public outreach.

The seven steps and related activities outlined here derive from agency personnel who are achieving success in their own setting. Collectively, they provide a practical reference for managers seeking ways to build an outreach program and partnership in their own community, or for those who want to improve an existing one. We believe that a long-term commitment to multi-partner relations is a requirement and will, over time, yield positive outcomes for managers and citizen stakeholders. Thus, each step also includes a section called *expected outcomes* to help participants see in advance the objectives they can achieve. The guide is arranged so that managers can choose their own "jumping-in point," and adjust their program accordingly.

We recognize, and want to emphasize, that creating a partnership within your community will involve a substantial commitment over an extended time. We developed this guide with the understanding that there is no quick fix; there is no short-cut to effective long-term citizen-agency interactions. Building lasting, durable relations takes considerable time, effort, and allowance for mistakes. It also requires a substantial amount of support from your organization. Finally, it takes a willing public—even just one or two individuals to start—who see the value in working together. We feel certain you already know a few of these people in your community.

Why a Partnership?

There can be many reasons for building an alliance with citizens in a forest community. In the big picture, the concern is primarily with reaching decisions that are objectively better. In other words, the quality of decisions is improved, in part, by giving citizens the opportunity to learn about fire-related problems and allowing them a role through interactions with managers and other citizens. For example, involving community members can help reveal issues they are concerned about. Partnerships lay the groundwork for understanding essential values people associate with places that are important to them and provide a way to explore a full range of alternatives, along with possible consequences. Thus, sharing knowledge and learning together can enhance the quality of decisions. In time,

these relationships also are likely to lead to faster, more efficient planning processes.

In the real-world of accomplishing work on the ground, building partnerships can help achieve two other objectives. First, they can help provide local residents with the knowledge and tools needed to take responsibility for fuel management on their own property. Most individuals will rise to the task if they understand the critical nature of the fuels job and if they see there are resources in their community to get the work done. Second, for citizens, the natural outgrowth of a meaningful relationship with fire management personnel is increased trust in the agency. Your positive interactions will help build trustworthy relations and lead to greater citizen support

Common Characteristics of Successful Partnerships

Inclusiveness
Use a variety of methods that encourage citizens to participate in developing and supporting a fuels program.

Sincere, interactive leadership
Most successful partnerships can be traced to one or two agency members who are not just good leaders, but have genuine interpersonal skills.

Fundamental organizational strategies
Sound planning includes setting objectives, clarifying roles, developing credible information, and identifying a desired product.

for fuel reduction and restoration activities on public lands. Thus, partnerships offer opportunities not only to experiment with approaches to forest management, but also to capitalize on local knowledge and build support for management decisions.

Examples of successful partnership activities can be found in a wide-range of management settings. In each case, site-specific conditions influence outcomes. Certainly, things such as stand density, fuel loads, and weather patterns are all important, but influencing factors are not limited to ecological conditions. They also include circumstances in the local human community. Through extensive research, we have found that a common set of characteristics exist among local partnership success stories. The box below provides an overview of these characteristics.

A common message in these ideas—one recognized by both agency and citizen participants—is that basic organizational skills, attention to detail, making good on commitments, and stable leadership frequently mean the difference between success and frustration. Most often, trust is the key component—and the result—of a successful partnership.

"Even though it's a lot of work up front to build relationships, it's well worth the effort in the back end because it can make the difference between a successful project and a failure."

Kris Martinson
Sisters Ranger District
Deschutes National Forest

Innovative and flexible
This includes the ability to adapt strategies to local, familiar settings where much is at stake for citizens. In these cases, existing groups (homeowner associations, watershed councils, etc.) may be useful allies with innovative ideas.

Early and continuous involvement
Having a plan that engages the public from the outset and maintains ongoing communication will lead to a more durable relationship.

Result is action
Nothing speaks louder to people than seeing their efforts turn into action. The implementation of a new community program, improved forest conditions, or completion of a project is a clear sign of success.

Step 1: Go In With a Plan

Organize an outreach plan **within your management unit** before approaching the public. It is important to bring the community into the planning and decision-making process as soon as possible, but internal pre-planning by a core management team is essential. Just as in planning any treatment or project, time needs to be devoted to organizing your outreach approach. This initial step involves creating a plan that allows agency personnel to agree on how community members will be included and how to communicate with them in an organized and effective manner. Often, an internal questioning process can help to accomplish these tasks.

Clarify your central objective(s) for fuel management. It is important that everyone understands and agrees on the purpose of your program. Clarifying objectives will allow all personnel to focus on the most suitable forms of outreach. Be sure to address the following items:

- *What are our specific objectives for fuel management, particularly as they apply to neighborhoods at the wildland-urban interface?*

- *What do we hope to accomplish with this outreach or partnership program?*

- *What should the public know, or be able to do, as a result of this communication process?*

- *What does the agency want from the public (e.g., understanding, feedback, acceptance, action)?*

Answers to these questions will help to articulate your fire and fuels message for the community. When it comes time to meet with citizens, clear and consistent objectives will allow residents to help identify specific targets and will prepare them to reach agreement on the most effective treatments for their neighborhood.

Be clear about why you are engaging the public and what their role will be. It is important to clearly define the scope of your outreach and partnership efforts by determining how you would like the community to be involved in the process. Organizing questions include:

- *Who is "the public" for this issue or this site?*

- *Are there specific groups or stakeholders for this problem?*

- *Are there groups or organizations that have an established relationship with agency personnel and can become part of the outreach effort?*

- *What is the public's role in this process and how will it be communicated?*

- *Are there (real) constraints that prohibit the community from being involved in some aspects of this planning process?*

Possessing a clear view of the community's role up-front will help to craft your message and shape the community's expectations.

Consider the community's expectations. Community members may already have ideas about how they would like to be involved in fire planning as well as what they would like to see accomplished. Their expectations may be shaped by factors such as previous experiences with the agency or the level of attention you have given to issues that are important to them. Be prepared to accommodate community members' expectations for involvement (to the extent practical), and let them know if their vision of participation is unrealistic by clarifying roles and responsibilities. Define clear limits up front to avoid confusion and frustration later in the planning process. Key questions include:

- *What are the community's attitudes about and understanding of the issues?*

- *How might the history of local citizen-agency relations affect public reaction?*

- *How might past management practices contribute to public reaction to the current problem?*

Identify what citizens need to know to participate. While a few community members might know a lot about fuel management, most probably have a limited understanding of the options. Be prepared to communicate with both ends of the spectrum by providing information in terms people can understand. Agree on the meaning of key terms (e.g., *prescribed fire, fire return interval, native species*) and on how they will be used. Pay close attention to language—agency acronyms and jargon sometimes confuse or frustrate people. Your primary task in this stage is to build citizens' capacity for understanding the fire problem so they can respond to it. An equal task is to understand their fears, concerns, and information needs by listening to them. Likely questions include:

- *What are the important terms and concepts we need to communicate?*

- *What are the primary risks involved in a no-action alternative? How serious, how soon?*

- *What risks are involved in the various treatment alternatives? Likely outcomes?*

Evaluate internal resources to accomplish the job. Although every management unit has financial and personnel resources it can commit to outreach activities, these are usually in limited supply. Determining the best use of available resources is essential. Questions include:

- *What financial resources are we willing to commit to this effort?*

- *Who are the best individuals to be in the lead (public contact) for outreach activities?*

- *What internal constraints will influence the type or scope of an outreach program?*

- *How will decisions be made and who will make them (i.e., resource specialist, District Ranger)?*

Identify how the public's input will be used. Once you engage citizens in fire planning, they will want to know how you intend to use their input. Determine how information from the public will be collected and incorporated into the planning process. This will include mechanisms that provide easy access to key agency personnel as well as those that enable community members to actually see how their ideas have been included in project plans. It is equally important to let them know when certain ideas cannot be used. Ultimately, they will want to know the resulting plans reflect discussions that emerged from the partnership arrangement.

- *How will we solicit public opinion and capture it for use?*

- *How will these ideas be represented in the planning process?*

- *How will we respond when suggestions are not useful?*

Expected Outcomes

As a result of this internal, organized approach to planning, positive outcomes will emerge.

- The management unit will have an internal planning process for public outreach.
- Personnel will reach agreement on how to achieve the plan and avoid "surprises" later on.
- There will be a refinement of public information materials and programs; financial resources can be directed to the most productive and useful methods.
- The best personnel for working on the front-lines of outreach will emerge and resources for doing the job will be identified.
- By thoughtfully considering the community's role, the agency will appear better organized and be more capable of providing sound leadership.

> "They need to be good communicators, which means being good listeners and understanding what the group is concerned about. At the same time, it also means communicating the agency's interests."
>
> Bill Anthony
> Sisters District Ranger
> Deschutes National Forest

Step 2: Choose the Right People and then Support Them

Consider who in your management unit should be on the front line of the outreach effort. The ability to make genuine connections with citizens is a special talent; not everyone is adept at this aspect of the job. But it is these personal relationships that form the foundation of successful partnerships.

Select a leader with organizational skills and a personality that resonates with the public. Good organizational skills and attention to detail are a must for anyone leading an outreach effort. Simple acts—personal contacts with key cooperators, prompt answers to questions, demonstrating concern for stakeholder views—help community members feel their concerns are taken seriously by a professional who follows through on commitments. Good leaders have a natural ability to engage people in thoughtful consideration of a problem and also listen to them. These individuals build trust along the way. They are well-informed, able to think on their feet, and comfortable speaking to individuals, groups, and the media.

Think of those individuals who may already have a working relationship with the community. The "right" person for the outreach job is most likely already doing it. These individuals are not necessarily public affairs personnel; instead, they may be resource specialists working with citizens. Partnerships often start through personal relationships that emerge as agency personnel begin to interact with members of a local community. Identify the individuals in your unit who may already have established credibility and trust with local citizens. They have a feel for the community's concerns and expectations. Take advantage of their credibility to advance your fire program's outreach efforts.

Select the best methods for conveying the fire message. Choosing the right person also means choosing the right methods and materials for conveying your message. In some cases, low tech may be better than high tech. For example, GIS layers look impressive but may not be particularly useful for many audiences—especially when displayed in abundance. They may provide far too much information. Similarly, websites have become a standard method for posting information, but research shows the public does

not access agency sites very often. They are attractive options for making a campsite reservation, but less so for learning about management policies.

One helpful place to start is to inventory available visual materials (e.g., maps, photos, videos, and other graphics) that could become part of an outreach program. Then, try them out on a small, friendly group of citizens who can provide feedback. It is likely they will tell you that messages conveyed in person and that target a specific group or place will be better received. Listen to them. Fire research shows that interacting directly with citizens is the most effective form of outreach. Field tours, demo sites, and meetings with small groups of property owners are highly rated.

Support outreach personnel. Partnership arrangements must be supported by a visible (top to bottom) agency commitment for implementation. This begins with recognition of the skills required to do the public outreach job. This also includes enabling motivated personnel to develop effective strategies and implement good ideas. They need encouragement from an organization committed to their efforts as well

as to the public's role in fire planning. This will mean allowing greater flexibility to take risks, to experiment with new ideas, and to give citizens a role in accepting responsibility for fuels management.

Create opportunities for those who work on the front lines to practice and improve their communication skills. Encourage outreach personnel to try new approaches and develop innovative strategies for engaging the public. By most standards, the existing federal communications "tool kit" is antiquated. Personnel will need the freedom to step out of the traditional agency NEPA planning model and adapt strategies that allow their leadership and communication skills to emerge. This may require additional training opportunities beyond those provided by the agency.

Expected Outcomes

- Sound leadership will be established and provide a focal point for the outreach program.
- Personnel will assume their most functional roles.
- The outreach job will be legitimized and personnel given the authority to lead.
- The management unit will develop a better capacity to respond to public concerns.
- As the public learns who is in charge and there is someone to contact about their concerns, tension will be reduced.
- Convincing evidence for how serious the agency is about building partnerships will become evident to all parties.

Step 3: Take Advantage of Existing Resources and Build the Fire Message

Utilize individuals and organizations that can carry your message to a larger audience. Look for key individuals or organizations—such as property owner associations, watershed councils or "friends" groups—that may already have a constituent base and can be an ally in communicating the fire message. Local residents already know each other and usually have defined what are accepted forms of communication in their community. In many cases, they have also figured out how to work together for a common purpose.

Recognize the good work already being accomplished and piggy-back on these efforts. One reason community groups exist is because they share agency concerns about natural resource management. Working in collaboration with them can yield measurable returns for fire management. These groups are already mobilized to get projects accomplished through local residents; you may just need to direct their efforts toward fuel reduction activities. Most likely, this will mean sharing control of the planning process. But as these groups reach out to a larger segment of the community, they can lend credibility to your message.

Engage the entire community affected by fire planning.   Be sure your message reaches everyone affected by proposed actions, even if they seem disinterested. It is important people feel you have made an effort to include them, even if they choose not to participate initially. Lack of participation does not necessarily indicate lack of interest. Many citizens will see agency practices and programs as more legitimate just by knowing that you are attempting to include the public in a partnership role.   By reaching out to the entire community, it will make it easier for non-participants to jump-in later when fire conditions grab their attention.

Use a variety of strategies to get your message across. A number of different communication methods are needed to reach all segments of the community. The specific method selected is based on your communication objective, the needs of your audience, and the contextual influences of your local situation. It is useful to think of delivering the fire message at three levels; each has its own role.

The first level is the *awareness building* stage. The purposes here are to generate increased recognition of a problem or threat, prepare people for subsequent messages, and encourage information seeking. Traditional mass communication formats (brochures, newspapers, PSAs) are usually good at instilling the central idea about wildland fire, particularly to large general audiences. The Smokey Bear campaign is a primary example. But Smokey's message is limited; such formats are not very useful for delivering details. These tools work best when they establish relevance for other stages of the overall communication strategy.

The second level involves *increasing public acceptance*. The assumption here is that targeted information provision will result in increased knowledge which, in turn, will positively influence participants to alter their opinion about fuel reduction practices. In this stage clear, understandable messages that describe the problem and present compelling evidence are important. This can be accomplished through more hands-on or interpersonal forms of message delivery (field visits, interpretive activities, demonstration sites) tailored to local conditions. Such approaches have proven useful in building public acceptance of management practices and the individuals who implement them.

Encouraging behaviors is the third and most interactive level. This stage helps further participant understanding of fuel reduction practices while building skills for individuals to undertake treatments on their own land. The audience for these messages is smaller, but certainly critical to successful programs at the wildland-urban interface. At this level, real change in how people come to understand and adopt fuel reduction activities can be accomplished. They need places to work through the uncertainty and risk associated with unfamiliar practices. Interactive methods, often through partnerships, have greater flexibility

to be tailored to local conditions and specific concerns of property owners. It is the give-and-take of these exchanges (small workshops, demonstrations on defensible space) that help citizens become comfortable with the options and reinforces belief in their ability to carry them out. These programs can result in entire neighborhoods or homeowner associations taking responsibility for fuel management. In many cases, it is this personal contact and involvement that leads to program success.

Designing Message Delivery

Review objectives, citizen information needs, and local context
- Is the communication objective to build awareness, influence attitudes, or change behavior?
- Is the need to establish relevance for the wildland fire message across the community or target the specific information needs of property owners?
- What concerns and anxieties do local residents have about fire and fuel reduction activities in places they care about? Are there logical places where contextual issues can be demonstrated and discussed?

Organizing levels

Awareness building
Used to generate increased recognition of an issue and sensitize audience to subsequent messages. Mass media, one-way communication methods are most appropriate. Examples include:
- brochures, newsletters, news releases
- TV or radio public service announcements
- internet websites
- exhibits at state/county fairs, parade floats

Increasing public acceptance
Used to help build understanding of options and public acceptance of agency fuel practices. These messages target particular audiences to help explain and develop support for the rationale behind specific management approaches. Examples include:
- guided field trips
- demonstration sites
- interpretive centers and activities
- meetings with property owners or organized groups

Encouraging behaviors
Designed to provide in-depth understanding of treatments and to encourage skills for specific actions such as taking responsibility for fuel reduction on private property. Methods target local audiences and focus on relevant places (neighborhoods, recreation sites). Examples include:
- small group workshops
- demonstrations on defensible space
- joint projects with homeowner associations
- partnerships with established groups

Expected Outcomes

- A larger constituent base will emerge—one that favors more active management.
- Important community members will help carry the agency message, effectively sharing the load and taking personnel out of the perpetual "hot-seat."
- Community capacity for responding to fire and fuel reduction problems will be built.
- Community members will help identify trouble spots in need of active management.
- The best utilization of outreach resources will result; message delivery will target different levels and purposes.

Where it's Working: The Heritage Forest Demonstration Project

Located near Bend, Oregon, the Metolius Basin is home to many year-round residents and attracts thousands of recreation visitors each year. The Sisters Ranger District of the Deschutes National Forest and a local citizen group, the Friends of the Metolius, have forged a partnership to address fuel management concerns throughout the Basin. Together, they have initiated a project that uses thinning and prescribed fire to treat fuel loading near private property and recreation sites.

Additionally, the District and the Friends have developed a demonstration site designed to inform community members and the general public about options for managing local forests. Located on a highly visible area of federal land and partially funded by the Friends, the Heritage Forest Demonstration Project showcases a variety of treatment options and techniques, complete with interpretive signs. The Friends work closely with the Sisters District to offer regular tours of the site. The Project has sparked positive conversation within the community and provides citizens with a ground-level forum to discuss their concerns and expectations with agency staff. This citizen-agency partnership was a primary factor in Disctrict implementation of a 14,000 acre thinning project.

Step 4: *Get Out on the Ground and into Neighborhoods*

Create opportunities to meet the local community in their setting.   Residents in forest communities have fallen in love with their place. They care deeply about their home site, their "backyards," and other familiar places in their community. It is important to meet with them in these settings, where they have a stake in what happens. You can help these committed people develop a better understanding of their surrounding resources, which will enable them to work together to accomplish mutual objectives. As a result, they will begin to recognize the value (and necessity) of fuel reduction activities. Out of this awareness comes a sense of pride in the group working together as well as in having a partnership for getting the job accomplished.

Show the community what will be done, how it will be done, and how they will be affected. It is important to provide specific information about local forest conditions and planned fuel reduction projects. Demonstration sites are excellent places for these conversations, and allow people to "see it for themselves." If you don't have an existing demo site, create one. They can be used to showcase successful prescribed burns and thinning treatments or exhibit what healthy forests look like. On site, use real life stories, analogies, and personal experiences to enhance the discussion. People respond better to visual images and ideas they can place in a meaningful context.

Be sure to discuss potential risks. Resource-specific specialists can help answer questions and provide information about treatment alternatives, potential impacts, and the risks involved. Describe these in terms the public can understand, and be direct about the likelihood that something bad (e.g., an escaped burn, extensive smoke) might actually occur, and how you intend to deal with it. Once people have visited a demo site, it becomes easier to move the discussion to neighborhoods or places where future treatments will be necessary. People are more likely to accept management activities when they have had a chance to see them in action and become comfortable with the outcomes. If given a range of options, property owners can help decide (and will accept) those that work best for their site. People usually like to think things are their own idea.

Be prepared to understand and learn from the public's concerns about issues of local importance. Citizens possess knowledge about their local environment that can be important in the planning process. Many have lived in these locations for decades. They have concerns that, if not addressed, will hinder the agency's ability to implement a fuel reduction program. Often these involve their uncertainty about how your actions will play out on the ground. In the previous paragraphs, the words "discussion" and "conversation" were used with purpose. People need places to give thoughtful consideration to a problem, even struggle with it, and reach a judgment to which they are committed. This involves asking questions, airing opinions, weighing alternatives, and coming to terms with those in a leadership role. In local communities, it has been said that "trust is built by leaning forward when we listen, not when we speak." Currently, the trust-building process remains largely the job of agency personnel working on the front-lines of public interaction.

Expected Outcomes
- Management units will focus on methods that result in achieving local solutions and be less concerned with regional or national agendas.
- The agency will demonstrate a commitment to partnership arrangements and provide a place for citizens to express their concerns, fears, and preferences.
- Demonstration sites will emerge as effective places for communicating messages about fire management and forest health.
- Personnel will have a better understanding of community values. Relationships with local residents can provide an "early warning system" about future problems or concerns.

"I knew it was going to take a lot of personal commitment on my part to build relationships and trust. That only comes from spending time with people, interacting with them, sitting down in the middle of them."

Bill Anthony
Sisters District Ranger
Deschutes National Forest

Step 5: Let Your Actions Speak for Your Intentions

People respect and respond to individuals they view as trustworthy. As everyone knows, building trust is a long-term proposition; alternatively, it can be lost in a single action. Thus, achieving a balance point is a continual process of adjustment. In the case of fire management, the public is looking for genuine leadership from local agency personnel. Citizens want to know that you share their concerns for resources important to the local community. Your actions and professional competence are the criteria by which most people will judge the sincerity of your efforts.

Make good use of people's time. Time and effort are only two of the costs incurred by citizens in partnership arrangements. Individuals who volunteer are largely task oriented—they want to get something accomplished—but many find it difficult to contribute without purposeful leadership. Reward their investment by articulating the reasons for involving them and then make good on your commitments.   For many participants, the regular presence of the decision-maker is an important indicator of the value of their work. For example, participation by the District Ranger or resource specialist (who can make decisions) helps legitimize the efforts of the entire partnership. Groups take their work more seriously knowing their recommendations will be relied on and used.

Provide current and reliable information in terms people understand.   Having sound technical data is not a new idea. However, when managers and citizens together analyze information to form alternatives about fire management, it can be a new and refreshing experience. Defining terms and treatments early-on also helps; the terminology commonly used by forestry professionals is not necessarily the best language for the public. It is always a good idea to test terminology for clarity and to eliminate acronyms and the "jargon" factor that turns people off.

Addressing problems and questions together gets everyone working at the same level. This step is enhanced by having resource-specific specialists involved to provide the most current information and to help interpret it. Succinct descriptions are usually best. Citizen participants take their own preparation and role more seriously when they know they will be given good information as well as a chance to discuss it.

Create opportunities for personal interaction, and then listen. Research on fire management indicates that engaging the public in two-way communication is an essential component of any partnership. Be prepared to provide information, but then leave ample time to listen to community members. Most fuel reduction

practices hold a degree of risk or uncertainty for citizens. Pay attention to people's concerns; listen for important cues about what they really may be communicating (anxiety, fear of the uncertainties, disbelief, reluctance, and misunderstanding are all logical reactions). Address each in the context of the specific local setting. Reassure these individuals that their questions and ideas are important. Only after you are able to adequately deal with these initial (often emotional) responses will your audience be ready to work towards a mutual objective. The informal give-and-take that occurs between agency personnel and citizens is perhaps the most productive form of relation building.

Be honest about outcomes. Sometimes the public interprets agency information efforts to mean, "We're from the government and we're here to help you." These days, this is a common reaction, but still one that must be overcome. Letting your actions speak for you is important. For example, everyone realizes that honesty is the best policy, but "displaying" your honesty can help bridge a credibility gap. This is particularly true about outcomes over which you have little control. Taking the time to give residents a realistic answer about the amount and duration of smoke that will emanate from a prescribed burn can go a long way, just as helping them visualize what the results of a thinning project may actually look like. Become a credible source of information.

Make good on your commitments. A certain route to eroding your trust among the community is lack of follow through. People want to know that you can deliver on what you say you will do—whether it is simply showing up at their next homeowners' meeting or implementing a safe, effective prescribed burn on the day they are expecting it. This also means avoid making promises you are unable to keep. If you know you can't deliver on something, don't agree to it. If you can explain why and offer an alternative, do so. Your credibility as an information provider is a direct link to citizen beliefs about the legitimacy of agency management activities.

"Trust is built by leaning forward when we listen, not when we speak."

Nathan Putnam
The Campbell Group

Expected Outcomes

- Trust is built at two levels—in your personal relations with citizens and by the agency building credibility with the community.
- Citizen groups, as well as agency personnel, can learn about and evaluate available data.
- A more efficient and effective partnership emerges allowing work to be accomplished.
- When citizens adopt fuel reduction treatments on private property, they are more likely to demonstrate support for agency practices on adjacent federal lands.

Step 6: *Keep in Touch with the Community*

It is easy to fall into the trap of meeting with a group and then disappearing from view while implementing projects. Citizens often complain about agencies asking for their input or cooperation and then ignoring them. People want to see the benefits of their participation. They want to see evidence of action "on the ground" and an improved forest landscape. However, they do not want to be surprised by agency decisions or management actions.

Create opportunities to provide the community with frequent progress reports. Updates can come in numerous forms— mailings, newsletters, bulletin board postings, town hall gatherings, regular meetings with citizen groups, and so on. Another proven method is to attend the meetings of organized groups (property owner associations, watershed councils, friends group) to provide progress reports and answer questions. A useful strategy may be to ask key contacts how they would like to receive information. Adapt methods to what works for your community.

Look for and use windows of opportunity. In communicating ideas, timing is everything. Pay attention to those opportune moments when people are most willing to consider your messages. This might be just before fire season when the media has warned of a bad year or during a fire outbreak in a nearby community. Singular events are ideal for capturing attention and creating public partnerships. For example, agency organized tours just after a major fire event can help citizens understand the decisions necessary in a post-fire environment and lead them to focus their efforts for protecting remaining forest lands.

Incorporate community suggestions and feedback. Providing ways for citizens to see how their input is used can only help build prospects for future communication and participation. For example, giving credit to partner groups is easy to do (and easily neglected). Allowing these individuals to be a spokesperson for projects and plans means sharing some authority, but the payoff with other community members can be immeasurable. Also, citizen feedback is an important part of the monitoring and evaluation process; this information will help gauge future success.

Recognize small victories. Most people like to be part of the solution, and citizens respond much more favorably when they feel ownership in ideas. In cases where progress for implementing projects is slow, it is important to remember that the cumulative effect of group experience is a tangible dividend. Sometimes getting to know others around the table, realizing that their concerns are common concerns, and building more positive relationships, will be the only visible products from partnerships. They should not be underestimated; these activities often lead to a softening of positions and make way for progress down the road.

Expected Outcomes
- A more informed and supportive community evolves.
- Citizen groups will take on greater responsibility for fuels planning.
- Coalitions and allies can emerge among different community factions.

Where it's Working: Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks

Martha Hovis

Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks encompass a diverse fire-dependent landscape. Interpretive programs within the Parks are designed to help visitors understand that fire—in all of its forms—has shaped the landscapes of today and will continue to shape them in the future.

Park managers have adopted unique strategies to help communicate the fire message. Natural and prescribed fire events are often at the center of interpretive efforts. Whenever possible, roads and trails are left open so visitors can benefit from an up-close experience. "Roving interpreters" and temporary wooden bulletin boards help answer visitors' questions and provide more detailed information about the operations underway. Additionally, fire crews receive annual training to help them carry the Parks' interpretive message as they come in contact with visitors. All staff members are kept up-to-date about fire and fuel operations within the Parks to help answer visitors' questions so they feel more at ease with fire's natural role in the sequoia ecosystem. This information/communication system works because Park personnel at all levels have bought into its usefulness.

Martha Hovis

Step 7: Stay in it for the Long-Term

Think of trust-building as the central, long-term goal of public outreach. Trust is the essential component of accomplishing management objectives on the ground. No matter how brilliant a plan may be, nothing is validated unless the parties involved trust one another. But in this period of contentiousness, where management of ecosystems is complex and people's basic values are at stake, building trust is difficult. It requires great patience, requires many opportunities for individuals to interact, and is a product of numerous (often unpredictable) factors. Success will only be achieved in an organization that understands and promotes trust and relationship-building as the long-term goal of public interactions.

Building and maintaining partnerships requires a sustained commitment. Partnerships can continue to grow and be useful far beyond the conclusion of a single project. Now that much of the hard work of establishing a working relationship within the community has been done, stay with it. Treat partnership-building as a process, one that cultivates understanding as well as a method for generating and implementing alternatives.

Find ways that allow you to maintain communication with your community. This approach recognizes that public acceptance of management practices is always in a provisional state. Conditions that are acceptable now can become unacceptable if not monitored and attended to over time. Consistent leadership that sustains face-to-face community outreach makes a difference in the way citizens respond to management programs.

In the end, management programs that result from partnerships are more likely to gain broad public support. One goal of any outreach effort should be to plan and implement a strategy that fulfills management objectives while also meeting the public's expectations. Partnerships help make agency fire plans and fuel reduction projects seem more community-based by increasing the focus on problems that resonate with local residents. Within this atmosphere, more innovative ideas that go beyond "one-size-fits-all" policies become possible. This ultimately makes them more achievable.

Recognize that effective partnerships reflect an iterative process; one that builds on itself and requires continual "care and feeding." Providing a forum for discussion of problems and plans results in more stakeholders surfacing, who then learn, interact, and enrich the pool of potential solutions.

Expected Outcomes

- A community of informed stakeholders will emerge.
- Long-term relationships are built that can endure mistakes or disagreements.
- Partnerships become institutionalized as a legitimate way for agencies to do business.

Like any relationship, partnerships require continued commitment and renewal. In short, the job is never over. It may be tempting and expeditious to work with a community group to complete a project and then move on to the next treatment. But for all the reasons demonstrated here, it is important to continue strengthening existing partnerships. They include individuals who are likely to step up and carry your message forward elsewhere in the community. When a citizen coalition is established, people are more willing to work together to solve problems rather than relying on the local agency to initiate action. It is also easier to maintain existing partnerships over the long-run, saving the time and expense of crafting an outreach effort from scratch each time a new project arises. In sum, these efforts will only add to your credibility and provide greater latitude when you approach the community in the future.

Organizing an outreach program requires a continuous investment of time and resources, but these activities are now necessary components of getting the fuels management job accomplished. Though each management unit faces specific, unique challenges in its efforts to protect forest health and address citizens' concerns, the tools and strategies presented in this guide highlight significant steps to productive citizen-agency partnerships. Find your own "jumping-in point" and use these ideas to build a new program or improve on an existing one. Make them your own by adapting them to the needs and expectations of your local community.

Additional copies of this guide or the video program *Communication Strategies for Fire Management: Creating Effective Citizen-Agency Partnerships* can be obtained by contacting Dr. Bruce Shindler at Bruce.Shindler@oregonstate.edu.

Department of Forest Resources
Oregon State University
280 Peavy Hall
Corvallis, OR 97331