Forest Service Manager’s perceptions of public opinion regarding forest fires and smoke. Communication, education, and outreach strategies and their perceived effectiveness.

Background
A number of studies within the social sciences have been conducted over the years concerning what the public perceptions of wild land fires and smoke management by the Forest Service are. While these studies are helpful in determining this important variable in public tolerance, for communication to be truly effective a deeper inquiry must be made of the agencies perception of what the public does and does not understand about the strategies employed to prevent, as well as manage, forest fires. With the increased frequency, duration, and intensity of forest fires within this region in recent years there is a growing need for effective communication, outreach, and educational opportunities to help increase the public’s understanding and tolerance of smoke and alternative prevention methods.

Purpose
This study hopes to discover common themes of fire management’s assessment of public opinion as well as the effectiveness of current outreach and educational programs as perceived by fire managers. And in doing so gain a better understanding of ways to modify, change, or improve the attitudes and relationships between the public and the Forest Service.

Methodology
Data for this study was collected through three focus groups moderated by faculty from the University of Washington. Two of the focus groups consists of varying levels of management within the Forest Service region in the Pacific Northwest from front office personnel, which interacts primarily with the public through phone and office inquiries/complaints to field managers that deal with the public directly within the community. The third focus group consisted of members of the Warm Springs Indian Reservation Fire Management staff, to provide an alternative view of public perceptions on wild land fires and smoke, as well as comparison of outreach and education programs on the reservation versus off the reservation. The forest area of focus by these groups consists generally the Cascade Mountain Range.

The guiding questions within the focus groups where driven by three main subjects: Issues the public may have concerning forest fires and smoke, public understanding of the role fire plays in forest ecology, and current utilized outreach and education strategies. In order to achieve a better understanding of the Forest Service’s perception, each of these themes were followed with more open ended and opinion driven questions such as “How do you think the public ‘feels’ about forest fire management actions?”, “Do you think your outreach programs are effective?”, and “Do your communication efforts work as well as you intend them to?”. The discussions where then transcribed for data analysis.

Discussion
Manual analysis of the focus group transcriptions is currently underway to get a sense of the tone delivered in the opinions expressed by fire management about the public. This is important because of the desire to help foster a greater sense of community as well as identify the hurdles that exist in reaching those goals. Some of the hurdles that have arisen range from budget restraints, the interpretation of information given to the media and their deliverance of that information to the public, and consistency in Forest Service personnel in districts to “build” relationships with the public.

The data will be coded and further analyzed using a qualitative computer assisted software called NVivo. This process will include collecting certain statements regarding public perception as stated by various participants in the focus groups involved to gain a general idea of challenges that can be addressed to better improve communication, outreach programs, and educational opportunities.

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