A CONVERSATION ABOUT SMOKE

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GENERAL TAKEAWAYS

- Be aware of the imagined public. Be aware of the imagined problem. An inaccurate or overly narrow assessment can lead to focusing on topics or strategies that are unlikely to address the actual issue or concern.
- Understand your community, including what they care about. Effective messaging takes into account the context of your community's everyday lives and what they care about. Don't assume people care about what you as a practitioner care about.
- Use normal language to talk to people. Avoid overly dramatizing the issue with terms like catastrophic, devastating and/or 'megafires'. Fire is already dramatic, so there is no need to add dramatic language.
- Talk with your audience about the benefits of risk reduction in ways that highlight immediate benefits as opposed to long-term risk reduction. Highlight benefits that different individuals care about like increased wildlife habitat, beautifying the landscape, better views and more.
- If people aren't always worried about fire, don't assume your community is apathetic about reducing wildfire risk. Fire is just one of many concerns in people's lives and only those whose job is fire can afford to worry about fire all the time. We need to make sure they worry about it just enough to get things done when they need to get them done.
- There is a challenge with any behavior change. Simple messages only work with simple actions. That is why one-on-one interactions are a key part of changing behavior. People can ask questions, clarify misperceptions and more easily identify how they might incrementally adopt fire adapted behaviors.
- Treat conversations as a learning journey. Give people pieces and allow them to learn at their own pace.

PRESCRIBED FIRE

- Explaining the ecological benefits of prescribed fire may be more influential to people than understanding how prescribed fire reduces risk.
- "Smoke now" vs. "smoke later" is a false dichotomy and can come across as patronizing. Decreasing long-term potential for wildfire smoke may matter little to a parent with a child with asthma.
- A key benefit of prescribed fire smoke is that it can be taken into account in the planning and management process. Highlight the extensive planning that goes into any prescribed burn to reduce uncertainty, particularly to reduce potential smoke impacts and escape.

SMOKE

- Help people negotiate “how to live better” with smoke. Dive into how to smoke behaves and how to support their health. Promote use of AirNow, etc. to give people the info they want, when they want it so they can more easily identify when and where their best opportunities for good air quality might be.
- Help people feel heard. Empathy, transparency and detail on pros and cons are key. Too often we simplify our messaging. Help your community understand the complexity of the topic so they understand the pros and cons.

TIMING

- Use empathetic messaging when talking about an upcoming wildfire season and message with enough lead time for people to gather resources and feel prepared.
- Messaging shouldn't be a one-time “campaign.” What people care about may change over time and there are lots of dimensions to a long-term conversation about wildfire.
- A good behavior messaging campaign is constant (i.e., a year round program/effort).

MEASURES

- Your messaging is working when the person who used to be vocal against your program begins to support it or when people stand up for the fire professionals and for prescribed fire.
- When considering whether you are changing attitudes and beliefs, think about whether you are moving forward on your projects and if you are getting less negative reactions to them.