Wildland Fire Education Working Team
Interagency Wildland Fire Key Messages

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Introduction

Wildland fire management agencies and organizations share common goals: to enhance personal safety and reduce loss of life while preserving and enhancing the health of forests, rangelands, prairies, and wetlands. Though communication of fire issues is extensive throughout the wildland fire community, our messages have not been consistent. For the public to truly understand the role of wildland fire, we must communicate clearly and consistently across all agencies.

> **NWCG Wildland Fire Education Working Team and Fire Use Team**
> - U.S. Department of the Interior
>   - Bureau of Indian Affairs
>   - Bureau of Land Management
>   - National Park Service
>   - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
> - USDA Forest Service
> - National Association of State Foresters
> - The Nature Conservancy

To that end, the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's Wildland Fire Education Working Team (WFEWT) and Fire Use Working Team (FUWT), composed of representatives of the nation's wildland fire management agencies and partners, have developed *key messages* to communicate the following important elements of our efforts:

- The role of wildland fire in ecosystems.
- The actions that land management agencies are taking to reduce risks and realize benefits of wildland fire.
- The need for partnerships among agencies, tribes, residents, and communities to understand and prepare for wildland fire.

This document is designed as a guide for all those involved in wildland fire management. We hope it will help you communicate with key audiences about wildland fire. *This is not a script.* Users are encouraged to incorporate these concepts into their communication in their own words, making the information relevant to their specific situations. What follows is a description of what we mean by "key messages" and other important pieces of this effort.

Key Messages: Key messages are general concepts that agencies are encouraged to incorporate into their discussions, print materials, and other resources used in communication, education, information, and prevention efforts. Key messages are umbrella statements that require additional supporting points and examples for context.

Supporting Points: The supporting points provide detail for the key messages and enable users to further explain the roles of: wildland fire in the ecosystem, land management agencies, tribes, and partners.

Examples: Users are strongly encouraged to use local and regional examples to place the key messages and supporting points into context for their audiences, connecting with them on a personal and emotional level.

For more information contact your NWCG WFEWT agency representative listed on the web site at: http://www.nwcg.gov/teams/wfewt/roster.htm

Key Messages

1) **Wildland fire is an essential, natural process.**

2) **Society's influence has altered historic fire cycles, leading to a dangerous and difficult build-up of vegetation in our wildlands.**

3) **Land management agencies are committed to a balanced fire program that will reduce risks and realize benefits of fire.**

4) **Improving the health of the land and reducing risks to communities requires partnerships among federal and state agencies, tribal governments, fire departments, communities, and landowners.**

5) **Public education is necessary to the success of fire management programs.**

Messages with Supporting Points – ALL AUDIENCES

1) <u>**Wildland fire is an essential, natural process.**</u>

   a. Fire has helped shape our wildlands for thousands of years, and is important for the survival of many plants and animals.
- **i.** Fire reduces accumulation of vegetation that can inhibit plant growth.
- **ii.** Some plants and animals depend on fire for survival. Periodic fire stimulates growth, reproduction of plants, and provides wildlife habitat.
  Use local or regional examples (i.e. lodgepole pines need fire to warm their cones, allowing them to open and drop seed)

   b. Fire behaves differently throughout the country.
- **i.** In addition to fuels (vegetation), fire behavior is affected by weather and terrain.
- **ii.** Virtually all vegetation types in the United States can experience wildland fire.
  Use local or regional examples

2) <u>**Society's influence has altered historic fire cycles, leading to a dangerous and difficult build-up of vegetation in our wildlands.**</u>

   a. Social and cultural approaches to wildland fire over the past century have focused on preventing and suppressing all wildland fire. We continue to learn and now have a more complete understanding of the essential role fire plays in our environment.

   b. When paired with the right terrain and weather conditions, dense build-up of vegetation leads to fires that burn hotter, last longer, and spread faster. As a result, these fires become difficult to manage and can threaten areas of residential development.

- **i.** In addition, excess vegetation and lack of fire in some areas is threatening plant and animal life.
  Use local or regional examples

3) <u>Land management agencies are committed to a balanced fire program that will reduce risks and realize benefits of fire.</u>

    a. *Safety* **of firefighters and the public is the No. 1 priority** of land management agencies.

    b. Land management agencies' **fire management programs** are customized for specific wildland areas to restore the land to more natural conditions, maintain already healthy ecosystems, and protect neighboring communities.
        i. Fire management programs are designed based on a **balance of needs** including **fire suppression, prevention, and fire use**. There will always be a need for prevention and suppression to protect people and communities.

    c. **Fire is a management tool** used to accomplish specific objectives in a plan such as removal of excess vegetation or stimulating plant growth and regeneration.
        i. **Naturally occurring fires** (lightning, etc.) are either suppressed or allowed to burn in a closely monitored and confined area, based on the fire plan for the area.
        ii. Sometimes it may be necessary and/or beneficial for land managers to start fires in a closely monitored and confined area. These fires are referred to as **"prescribed fires."**
        iii. A fire program also may include **non-fire treatments** to prepare the land before natural or prescribed fire can be applied safely and effectively.
            Use local or regional examples

    d. **Fire use is a managed process** with comprehensive guidelines that prioritize safety and direct the planning and operations of the activity.

4) <u>Improving health of the land and reducing risks to communities requires partnerships among federal and state agencies, tribal governments, fire departments, communities, and landowners.</u>

    a. Fire burns where conditions are right. Fire does not acknowledge jurisdictional boundaries of federal, state, and local agencies; tribes; or private landowners.

    b. Agencies, tribes, and communities are working together to understand and accept what it means to live in a fire-prone area and to realize the benefits of managing fire in the wildlands.
        i. Agencies and tribes are managing public and tribal lands through overarching fire management plans and programs.
        ii. Agencies and tribes also are working to educate local governments and property owners of ways to make their land and property more defensible against wildfire.
            Use local or regional examples

    c. People who live and recreate in fire-prone lands assume a certain level of risk and responsibility due to the condition of the surrounding environment.
        i. People **can** live compatibly with fire, if actions are taken to be aware of – and prepared for – local fire conditions.
            1. Contact your local, state, or federal agencies, or tribal fire management organization to determine your community's fire conditions and discover tips to reduce your community's fire vulnerability – before a fire starts.
            2. The more populated and closer a community is to fire prone areas, the greater the need for proactive fire management.
        ii. Smoke from prescribed fire is a sign that steps are being taken to reduce risks and realize benefits of fire. The more land management agencies can plan and manage fire the more they can reduce smoke impacts.

Messages with Supporting Points – INTERNAL AUDIENCES

The following message and supporting points are intended for internal audiences within land management agencies.

5) <u>**Public education is necessary to the success of fire management programs.**</u>

   a. **Fire is an important issue for the public, and public understanding is key to our ability to effectively manage wildland fire.**
      i. For many years, people have learned to fear and avoid fires of all kinds in wildland areas – whether they are natural or started by people.

      ii. Individuals act based on their *perceptions*. Understanding the role of fire will help landowners and land users appreciate and support the efforts of federal, state, local, and tribal fire management organizations.
         1. Every year, millions of people visit and use wildland areas across this country. People are fascinated with fire, and we have the opportunity to introduce them to its benefits/role.

      iii. We need to motivate landowners and land users to mitigate fire hazards on private property, use recreational fire safely, and support fire management efforts so land management agencies, tribes, and firefighters can focus on public lands. This will ultimately reduce loss of life, property, and natural resources.

   b. **We need to communicate with our neighbors about the role of wildland fire in a consistent, simple, and memorable way.**

      i. We need to demonstrate the importance of fire management to the public, agencies, and tribes by continually showing support for these practices.
         1. We must educate within our own agencies to ensure that staff understand and support fire management and public education efforts.

      ii. We need to be clear in our communications about both the benefits and risks of wildland fire.
Use local or regional examples, such as acknowledging that there is risk of a health impact with smoke, but the benefits of fire management are greater the the riskes. These examples should recognize that smoke always poses a risk to people with severe respiratory problems.

      iii. Often people's perception of fire is shaped by the media's representation of fire. We need to be sure the media understand the role of fire and assist them by providing more comprehensive information about fire and the management issues facing federal, state, tribal, and local fire management organizations.