



# SOUTHERN Fire Exchange

Uniting Fire Science and Natural Resource Management



SFE Fact Sheet 2015-3

## Communication and Delivery of Prescribed Fire Messaging: Lessons from a Prescribed Fire Communications Summit

*Kristen Kunkle, Jennifer Evans and David Godwin*

### SUMMARY

A 2015 workshop of prescribed fire professionals from across the Southeast developed a list of “Seven Best Practices for Prescribed Fire Communication.” The crowdsourced list was crafted based on collective experience and can be used to improve prescribed fire themed communication and outreach plans intended for private forest landowners.

### INTRODUCTION

In July 2015, approximately 67 people representing 33 agencies, organizations, and universities, gathered at the Tall Timbers Research Station in Florida to attend the “Putting Fire to Work for Working Forests and Landscapes: Best Practices for Communication and Delivery of Prescribed Fire Messaging” Summit. The two-day event offered a diverse series of speakers, expert panel discussions, facilitated group conversations, and opportunities to review and synthesize information with the purpose of identifying strategies and action items tied to communicating information about prescribed fire with industrial and non-industrial private forest landowners.

The presentations and discussions highlighted the current state of prescribed burning on private lands throughout the Southeast, methods for increasing private landowner participation in burn programs, strategies for enhancing communication with target audiences, and lessons learned



Communication programs should understand and speak to the values and concerns of the target audience. For example, research has shown that the public are more likely to support using prescribed fire to maintain and improve forest health than for reducing wildfire risk. Photo by David Godwin.

from past efforts. With the overall goal of increasing prescribed fire on private lands, participants developed a crowdsourced list of seven recommended best practices for improving and planning prescribed fire communication programs.

### SEVEN BEST PRACTICES FOR PRESCRIBED FIRE COMMUNICATION

1. Define your audience and develop messages that are specific and appropriate for that audience.
2. Foster consensus among program partners on the use and usefulness of targeted messaging strategies.
3. Ensure that information is coming from sources that the audience is known to trust.
4. Use appropriate language with your audience.
5. Promote peer-to-peer relationships among private landowners, for example:
  - Initiate prescribed fire mentoring programs.
  - Encourage “over the fence” interactions among landowners.
6. Utilize multiple communication channels, for example:
  - Post signs designating land that is managed with prescribed fire.
  - Use demonstration fires as an opportunity to attract new prescribed fire practitioners.
7. Maintain consistent contact with target audiences. Build relationships. Sustain a continuous conversation with the target audience.

### STRATEGIES BASED ON RESEARCH

Studies suggest that landowners within the United States respond best to peer-to-peer approaches and interpersonal communication with experts (Monroe et al. 2006, Ricci et al. 2010). A peer-to-peer approach might be characterized by neighbors sharing land management strategies and experiences. As related to prescribed fire, these two types of communication could be encouraged through:

- Prescribed Burning Associations, Prescribed Fire Councils and other informal social networks.
- Building trust with communities and partners by showing involvement and willingness to help.
- Fostering a sense of equality where peers can share knowledge and individuals are recognized as both learners and leaders.

### ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRESCRIBED FIRE COMMUNICATION

Workshop participants also developed lists of additional factors, concepts, and tactics that might be useful for improving communication programs related to increasing prescribed fire on southeastern private lands. Some of the suggestions are listed here.

- Consider including an online social media campaign as part of your communication program.
- Investigate partnering with formal and informal educators to encourage integrating prescribed fire concepts into their curricula.
- Designate well-managed landscapes that the public or private landowners can visit to learn about the effects of prescribed fire on forests and wildlife.
- Develop and use evaluation tools to identify the needs, interests, and demographic characteristics of your target audience. In addition, collect feedback from program participants to assess the impact and efficacy of communication programs.
- Utilize and support existing prescribed fire communication and education programs, such as *One Message Many Voices* and Firewise Communities.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Kobziar, L., D. Godwin, L. Taylor, and A. Watts. 2015. *Perspectives on trends, effectiveness, and impediments to prescribed burning in the Southern U.S. forests* 6(3): 561-580. doi: [10.3390/f6030561](https://doi.org/10.3390/f6030561).



Property boundary signs that clearly associate fire maintained properties with the use of prescribed fire can be helpful for passively reinforcing the importance of prescribed fire in land management. Photo by David Godwin.

Monroe, M., L. Pennisi, S. McCaffrey, and D. Milet. 2006. *Social science to improve fuels management: a synthesis of research relevant to communicating with homeowners about fuels management*. GTR NC-267, Forest Service, North Central Research Station, U.S. Department of Agriculture, St. Paul, MN. doi: [10.2737/NC-GTR-267](https://doi.org/10.2737/NC-GTR-267).

Ricci, N., C. Demers, C., and A. Long. 2010. *Cooperation and communication: benefits for non-industrial forest landowners*. University of Florida, School of Forest Resources and Conservation. Gainesville: IFAS/University of Florida. Available at <https://journals.flvc.org/edis/article/view/118551/116474>.

Tools for Engaging Landowners Effectively project from the Sustaining Family Forests Initiative. Available at <http://www.engaginglandowners.org>.

#### Authors

Kristen Kunkle, University of Florida  
Jennifer Evans, North Carolina State University  
David Godwin, Southern Fire Exchange  
(Revised by A. Dixon on 28-Jan-2021)



For more information on the Southern Fire Exchange, visit [www.southernfireexchange.org](http://www.southernfireexchange.org) or email [contactus@southernfireexchange.org](mailto:contactus@southernfireexchange.org).



The Southern Fire Exchange is funded through the Joint Fire Science Program, in agreement with the United States Forest Service, Southern Research Station. This institution is an equal opportunity provider.