
KEY PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH FINDINGS ON THE ECOLOGICAL ROLE OF FIRE AND THE BENEFITS OF FIRE MANAGEMENT

Prepared by the Democratic polling firm of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin and Associates (FMMA) and the Republican polling firm of Public Opinion Strategies (POS)
for
Partners in Fire Education



Re-growth following the 1988 fires in Yellowstone NP

April 30, 2008



Turning Questions Into Answers.

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TO: Partners in Fire Education

FROM: David Metz
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RE: Written Analysis and Key Graphs Illustrating the Opinion Research Findings Regarding the Ecological Role of Fire

DATE: April 30, 2008

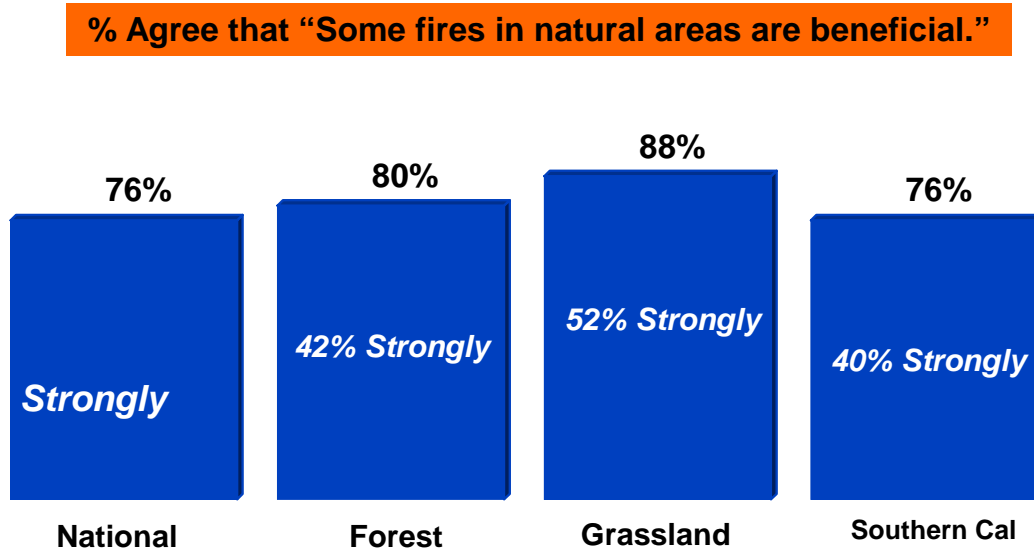
The Democratic polling firm of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates (FMM&A) and the Republican polling firm of Public Opinion Strategies (POS) recently partnered to complete extensive opinion research among Americans regarding the ecological role of fire and various approaches to fire, including a series of six focus group in fire-prone communities around the country, and a national survey of 2,000 individuals. The survey results are drawn from four key samples: a representative national sample of all Americans; and additional samples of residents of fire prone counties near and in forested areas in the Southeast and West; residents of fire prone counties in shrub and grasslands in the Rocky Mountain and Plains states; and residents of Southern California.

The survey had two key goals: 1) to establish a baseline of public attitudes toward fire from which to measure future changes in attitudes; and 2) to craft language and messages that increase acceptance of an ecological role for fire.

Among the key specific findings of the survey are the following:

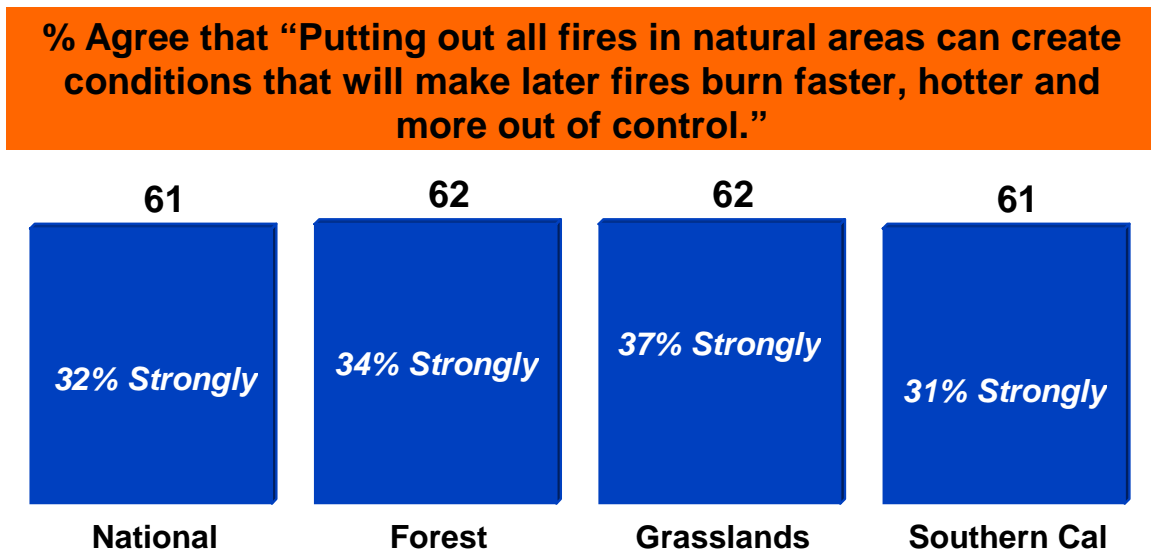
- The public is more sophisticated in its understanding of the ecological role of fire than might have been anticipated at the outset of this project. The following two graphs (Figure 1 and 2) speak to the level of sophistication we found among respondents nationally and in every sub-region. However, it is worth noting that there is a distinct difference in attitudes based on two key factors: 1) the educational attainment of the respondent, with those with higher levels of education more likely to express agreement with these core views of fire; and 2) by gender as women tend to be more risk averse and less accepting of the “story of fire” than are men. So for example, 81% of men agree with the statement regarding fire being beneficial and 71% of women agree with that statement.

Figure 1



- Notably, the focus groups made it clear that people *do* think there are “good fires” and “bad fires.” They tend to view naturally-started fires that do not threaten people’s lives or property as “good,” while fires that are started by man or that threaten property, lives or the health of a natural area are almost always seen as “bad.”

Figure 2



- At the same time, fire is still viewed with at least caution if not downright fear. Respondents in the focus groups used words like “panicky” and “devastated” to describe their emotions when thinking about fires in natural areas. When forced to choose, a majority of the American public continues to

side with a viewpoint that emphasizes this “dangerous” perception of fire. This view is relatively unchanged in the last four years.

44% nationally, +4% from 2004

Forest fires are a part of nature. We need to protect communities from fires, but in remote areas we should let fires burn and let nature take its course.

53% nationally, -3% from 2004

Forest fires are unpredictable and dangerous. We need to contain and extinguish fires as soon as they are discovered.

The view that fire is “dangerous” leads to a clear desire to ensure someone is actively attempting to “control” fire. This is reinforced when we test communications that underscore the necessity of reassuring voters regarding safety before other messages are accepted.

- There is growing concern about fire nationally. Today, 56% of Americans say that forest fires are getting “worse,” compared to 48% in 2004.
- Again because we conducted additional interviews in various sub-regions (as noted in the introduction), we were able to examine any distinctions in attitudes based on these geographic regions. More often than not, there were NOT significant distinctions between those living in fire prone forest areas, fire prone grasslands areas and the national sample. However, we can note some core distinctions:
 - 1) Southern California shows far greater concern about fire than any other region of the country. They are four times as likely to say their neighborhood has been evacuated (16%, compare to 4% nationally). They are nearly twice as likely to say they worry more about fire today than do adults nationally (46% worry more in Southern California, compared to 27% nationally). In addition, of the various conservation-related issues we tested, only in Southern California does fire top the list of concerns as one can see here:
 - 2) Conversely, the “forest” sample is the least distinct attitudinally, despite including only residents of areas near forested areas and often in counties that might typify the “wildland urban interface” (WUI). While recognizing that this explanation of WUI may be a widely accepted technical definition, it is worth noting that we found “WUI” more to be a state of mind of how people living in a range of places view where they live, rather than a geographically-determined point of view that is unique to people living in similar types of neighborhoods and communities.
 - 3) The “shrub-grassland” respondents are the least concerned of any geographic sub-group about being personally affected by a wildfire. Only 11% say they are worried that their property faces “serious risks from wild fires,” the lowest level of concern of any geographic sub-group. The grassland respondents were also more likely to agree that “some fires in natural areas are beneficial” (88% agree), and are the most supportive of implementing a range of approaches to fire like “controlled burns” in their own state.

Table 1. Summary of Issues Ranked By % Extremely/Very Serious in So. California

Issues	Southern California	National
Uncontrollable wildfires that destroy property and forests	51%	21%
Global warming	48%	40%
Loss of habitat for fish and wildlife	37%	28%
Smoke from fires in natural areas	36%	16%
Loss of forest land	36%	26%
Poorly-planned growth and development	33%	27%
Fire management in forests and public lands	32%	20%
Insects and diseases that kill trees	30%	22%
Too much logging of forests	21%	18%

- Despite concerns that fire is generally unpredictable, solid majorities accept approaches to fire that recognize the beneficial attributes of fire for the health of natural areas as long as precautions are taken. Support is significantly higher for the two approaches perceived as being the most pro-active:

90% support, 52% strongly support

Allow fire teams to use controlled burns when and where doing so will safely reduce the amount of fuel for fires.

79% support, 51% strongly support

Cut and remove overgrown brush and trees in natural areas that acts as fuel for fires.

Support is still strong, but less intense for the third and fourth approaches to fire tested:

62% support, 31% strongly support

Allow naturally started fires that do not threaten homes, people or the health of that natural area to take their natural course, rather than putting the fire out.

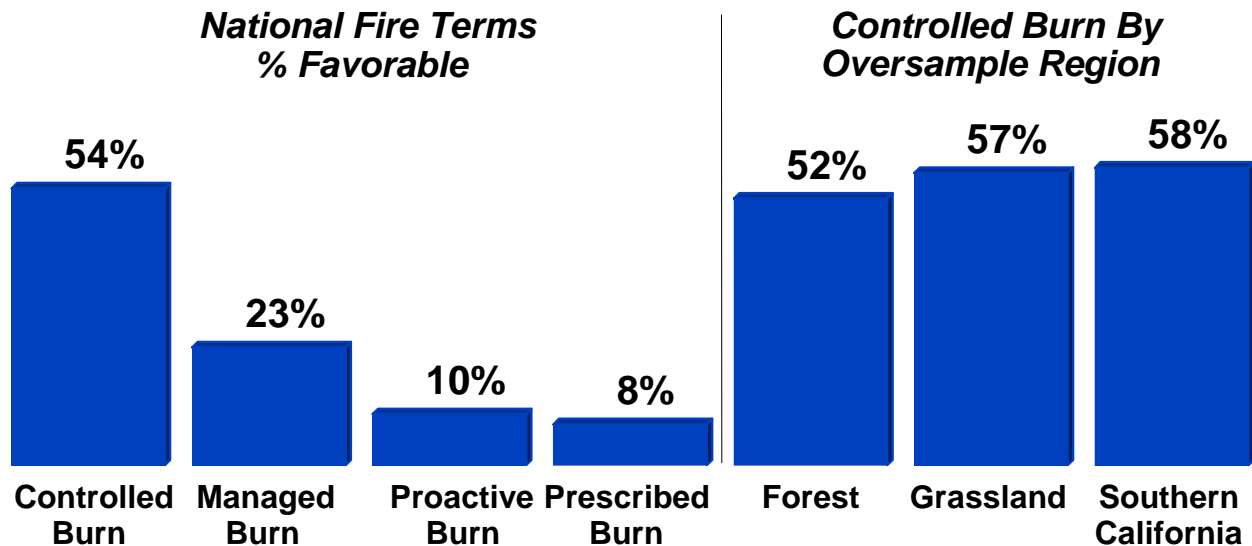
81% support, 44% strongly support

Shifting some existing government funds from putting out practically all fires to pro-actively cutting and removing overgrown brush and trees and using controlled burns to reduce the amount of fuel for fires.

Support for these approaches to fire cuts across most demographic and geographic groups. However, these approaches do tend to generate stronger support levels among men and among those with a college degree.

- In addition, the use of the term “controlled” was tested among the top rated competing phrases from the focus groups, and “controlled” resonates far more strongly than other potential descriptors, as seen in Figure 3. While the public intellectually understands that no one can “control” fire, this does not stop them from wanting to know that someone is *trying* to control it.

Figure 3



- Support for the approach referred to here as a “controlled burn” can vary depending on exactly how it is described and implemented. The following explanation demonstrates the research-based rationale that demonstrates why various terms were used to describe this practice:

Figure 4

The language for “controlled burns” was carefully tested in the focus groups.

Allow fire teams to use controlled burns when and where doing so will safely reduce the amount of fuel for fires.

Fire teams – A team of people – forest experts, fire fighters, and even perhaps weather experts are considered optimal to decide when and where fires can be conducted safely. They do NOT want an individual to make this decision alone.

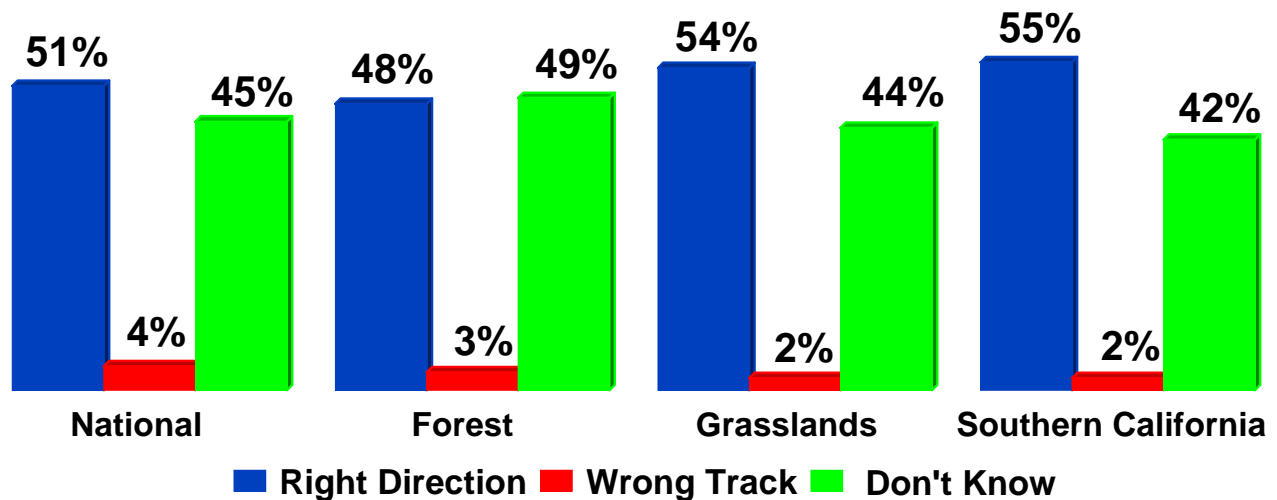
Safely – Always reassuring that safety is first and foremost in mind is critical.

Burn – Seen as smaller, less “wild” and more able to be controlled than a “fire.”

When and where – Focus group respondents saw many variables as potentially leading to out of control fires and want many factors considered.

- It is worth noting that after hearing about these four approaches to fire, a bare majority are willing to go so far as to say that these approaches to fire represent a “step in the right direction” (51%). Only 4% believe it is off on the wrong track, but the remainder – a significant 45% - say they simply do not know enough to say one way or the other. This same dynamic is evident in all of the sub-samples as well as demonstrated in the following graph:

Figure 5



- We learned a great deal about how to more effectively communicate the rationale for supporting these approaches to fire. Survey respondents were offered a series of statements that might be arguments for this four-point approach to fire, and were asked to rate each as either “very,” “somewhat,” or “not convincing.” Of a wide array of statements tested, a number rose to the top and provide clear direction on the language and themes which resonate most strongly:

#1 Reassuring people that safety is the top priority is of penultimate importance. One message that captures this concept is that:

“Safety is always the number one priority when it comes to fire. But, by putting out every single fire, we are actually creating more dangerous conditions. Using controlled burns to thin out overgrowth and carefully managing natural fires helps ensure the safety of neighborhoods in outlying areas” (43% say this is a very convincing reason to support this package of approaches to fire).

#2 Including people into the messaging is also important, as the public seeks to understand how this discourse on fire affects them personally. Several of the top-tier statements tested incorporate this “human element” successfully:

“Taxpayer money is being wasted putting out fires that are far from people and their property. A far more cost-effective approach is to use controlled burns to prevent large, severe fires from spreading into areas where people live, and to allow some fires to take their natural course, which costs five times less than trying to put out fires.” (41% very convincing)

“Forests and natural areas are important to our health - they act as natural filters to give us clean air, and are the source of our clean drinking water. We must ensure the health of our forests and natural areas by allowing some fires to take their natural course.” (40% very convincing)

#3 Highlighting the benefit of fire to natural areas is also appropriate. People do value the health of natural areas and we finally found specific language that elicits an overwhelmingly positive response:

“We know that allowing fire to take its natural course can help the health of our forests and natural areas. For example, the fires in Yellowstone in 1988 showed how natural areas can quickly bounce back rejuvenated with even more wildlife and types of plants than ever before.” (45% very convincing)

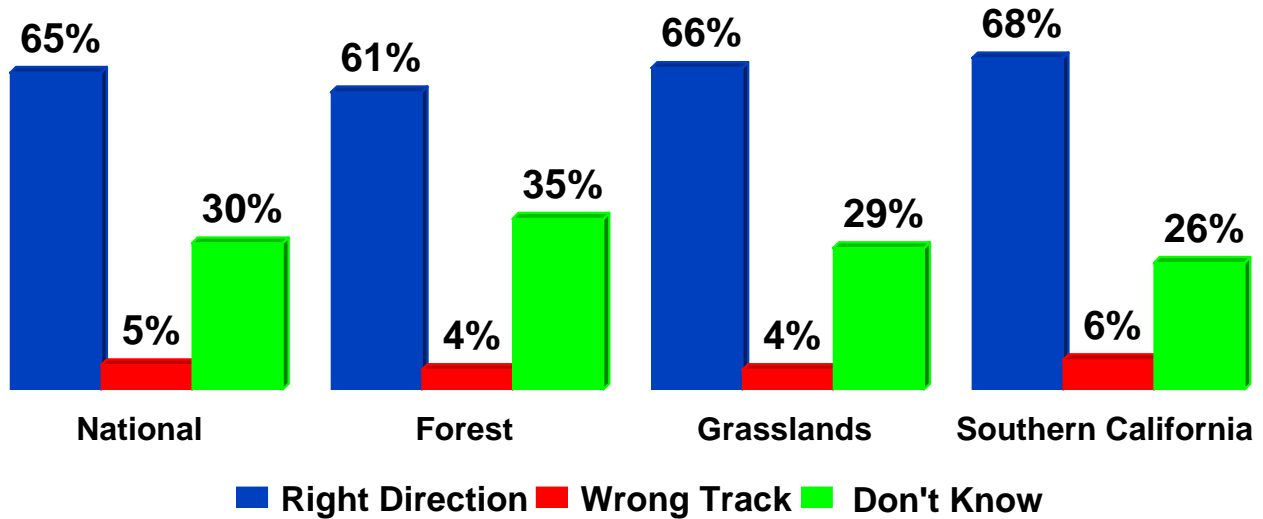
“Many types of plants and wildlife need fire to survive. Periodic fire stimulates growth, reproduction of plants, provides wildlife habitat, and ensures healthier natural areas near us.” (40% very convincing)

Interestingly, the Yellowstone example was one cited frequently by focus group respondents and was therefore incorporated into the messaging tested.

- These messages do move the needle and increase the perception that these approaches are a step in the right direction. Initially, 51% believe these approaches are a step in the right direction when considered as an overall package. After hearing this additional information, 65% say the same as seen in Figure 6.
- Female sub-groups and people in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states are most likely to increase their feeling that that these approaches are a step in the right direction.
- This information is most effectively conveyed by those that the public perceives as being on the “front lines” – namely, fire fighters and other “experts” who are out in the field and dealing with fire. Interestingly, “local” firefighters tend to be the preferred messenger for respondents who have been evacuated due to fires before.

- One messenger regarding fire issues that routinely came up in the focus groups was Smokey Bear. Smokey’s focus on preventing wildfire is not seen as compatible with the message about fire’s ecological role. Respondents perceive Smokey to be a messenger targeted at children, and still believe in the overarching, safety-oriented goal of trying to prevent man-caused fires in natural areas.

Figure 6



Groups Most Influenced by Hearing Messages

Category	% Increase in Support after Hearing Messages
Northeast Region Women	32%
Mid-Atlantic Region	30%
Northeast Region	28%
Independent Women	27%
Small City/Rural Women	26%
Women Age 18–54	25%
Women Without Degree	24%
White Democrats	24%
Women	23%
Less Than a Mile from WUI	23%
Motorized Recreation	23%

Summary of Sources of Information By % Very Believable - NATIONAL

Sources of Information	% Very Believable	% Total Believable
Park rangers	76%	97%
Fire fighters	76%	99%
Local fire fighters	61%	93%
State foresters	59%	88%
U.S. Forest Service	57%	91%
University forest science professors	41%	73%
Scientists	37%	81%
Conservation organizations	29%	75%
Hunters and fishermen	25%	66%
Federal land managers	24%	63%

Overall, the research clearly demonstrates that the public is increasingly savvy in its understanding of the core principles supporting the ecological role of fire. At the same time, there is still an emotional response to fire and a sense that fire is unpredictable and dangerous that has held steady over the last four years. Americans solidly back a number of approaches to fire that they perceive as being pro-active and keeping the safety of people and property in mind. They are slightly less comfortable with allowing some fires away from people and property to take their natural course, although more than three in five voters still back the idea. In communicating about these approaches it is fundamentally important to reassure that safety is a priority; to not lose sight of conveying how this issue affects people, and to demonstrate “success stories” like the Yellowstone example.

Methodology Statement:

FMM&A and POS completed telephone interviews with adults age 18 and older among four distinct audiences: 800 adults nationally proportionally throughout the United States; 400 adults in fire prone counties in forested areas in the West and Southeast; 400 adults in fire prone counties in shrubs/grasslands in the Rocky Mountain and Plains states; and 400 adults in Southern California. Interviews nationally and in the forest sample were conducted February 23-26, 2008, while interviews in the shrubs/grasslands and Southern California were conducted March 11-13, 2008. The margin of sampling error for the national sample is +/- 3.5%, and for the three targeted samples is +/-4.9%. The margin of error for subgroups within each sample will be larger.

Each sub-sample was composed of counties which were selected by the Research Sub-Committee. The explanation for selection is as follows:

FOREST:

To select high fire risk counties in the West, we used data from the Headwater Economic study “Home Development on Fire-Prone Lands West-Wide Summary”. The study identified counties with high current development and future development potential on lands adjacent to fire-prone public lands. For our sample, we selected counties with at least 20 acres of large areas of developed forested private lands adjacent to the fire-prone public lands.

To select high fire risk counties in the Southeast, we used data for the Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment (SWRA). We selected counties using their Level of Concern (LOC) rating. LOC is calculated as the Wildland Fire Susceptibility Index (WFSI) times the Fire Effects Index (FEI). SWRA uses districts instead of county boundaries so we identified districts with at least 50,000 acres with LOC 0.64-1.36 and at least 100 acres with LOC 14.9-100 and then selected the counties within those districts. In both the west and the southeast, we removed counties with large cities (pop. >150,000).

SHRUB-GRASSLANDS:

To select high fire risk counties in shrub and grassland areas, we started by examining the Landfire National data. While this data did help to narrow down focal areas within states, the data was either too coarse or did not completely cover grassland areas to be reliable for selection of the final counties. With the focal areas identified, we turned to on the ground fire and conservation professionals. We asked this group to name 5 or less counties in the focal areas that they are familiar with that meet the follow criteria: all or predominantly grass lands or arid lands; rural with no cities or towns over 50,000; high natural fire ignition.

In addition, the survey was preceded by three sets of focus groups among homeowners in the suburbs of major metropolitan areas, and in smaller outlying communities. The goal of the groups was to refine language and messages, and to inform the content of the survey. The groups were held in the following locations: Denver, Colorado; Bend, Oregon; and Jacksonville Florida. One group in each location consisted of homeowners who reside in relatively “close-in” suburbs, and/or farther from large, undeveloped natural areas, so that they are not as likely to be personally affected by fire but might see smoke, for example. The other group consisted of homeowners who reside in outer suburban/exurban or even rural areas (depending on the site). These home owners are residing in areas that would likely be considered as “WUI.”