

Forest Trends Values Study Executive Summary

3/4/25

"Remember, 99% of social impact messaging is rebuilding the social contract through personal parochial interests."

Rich Neimand, master values communicator

PROJECT MISSION

To create a powerful, persuasive, motivating communications framework, and coordinate these efforts broadly both with Forest Trends, their client, and externally with partners to build sustained awareness, trust, and support to implement the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Wildfire Crisis Strategy (WCS) in the Western United States.

By integrating the findings of this Forest Trends project, it will result in a more collaborative strategy engaging key stakeholders and influencers to support and actively help address what is needed to implement the plan in the twenty-one landscapes most vulnerable to wildfire.

METHODOLOGY

The Forest Trends team conducted a qualitative exploratory phase that reviewed and analyzed all research germane to this issue, along with one-on-one interviews with 20 experts from academia, NGOs, forestry professionals, and other partners. This allowed the team to build off years of research and experience without starting from scratch.

Armed with the knowledge and gaps in views emerging from the exploratory phase, the team conducted a quantitative values research study—utilizing the means-end framework for understanding the motivations behind decision-making. This online, in-depth survey included the people living in USFS Regions 1-6 as it applies to the impact of wildfires and what needs to be done. Personal values serve as the "end" of the pathway, where the benefits and consequences of the actions serve as the "means" to that end.

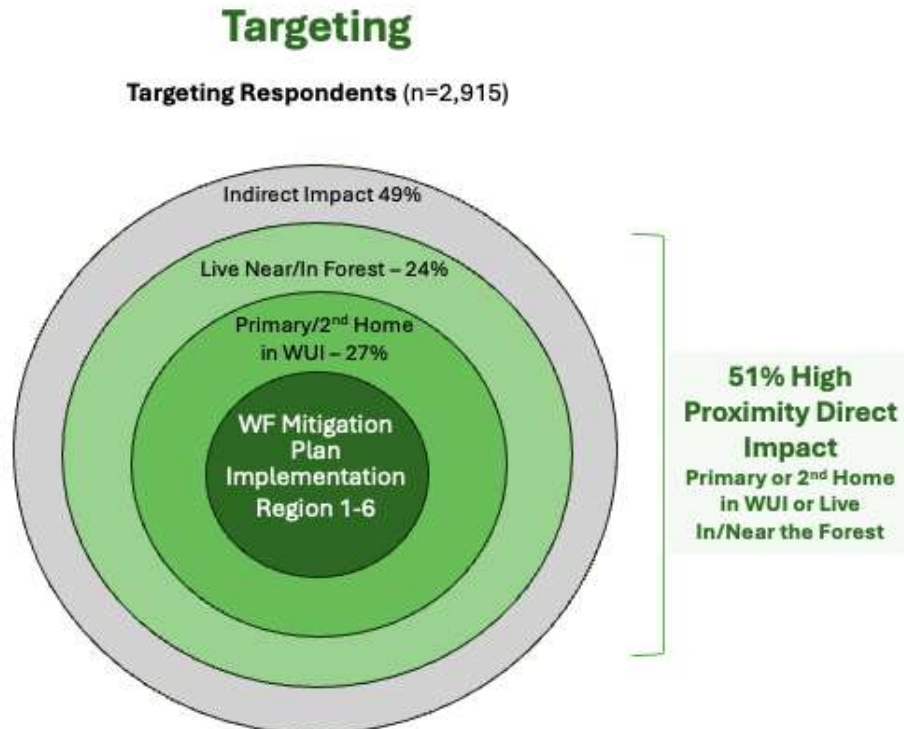
The questionnaire follows a series of questions (called "laddering") that identify how people think about actions that reduce the risk of wildfire and illuminates how those rational thoughts link to higher order emotions and values instrumental in changing behavior.

Laddering sequence questions:

- 1) Start with the negative: threats to forests and how people feel about those threats; and
- 2) Identify what we can do to combat those threats and actions taken to reduce wildfire risk (taken out of WCS) and how they feel about that.

In short, the questions started broad and general about “forest engagement” and then applied the above two laddering sequence exercises, ending with views and beliefs on wildfire mitigation and the USFS plan.

The team conducted almost 3,000 online interviews in late July 2024, which is robust and projectable. Below is a diagram of the respondents and how they qualified. Half of the respondents are in what is called High Proximity, meaning their primary or secondary homes are in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), or they live in or near a forest.



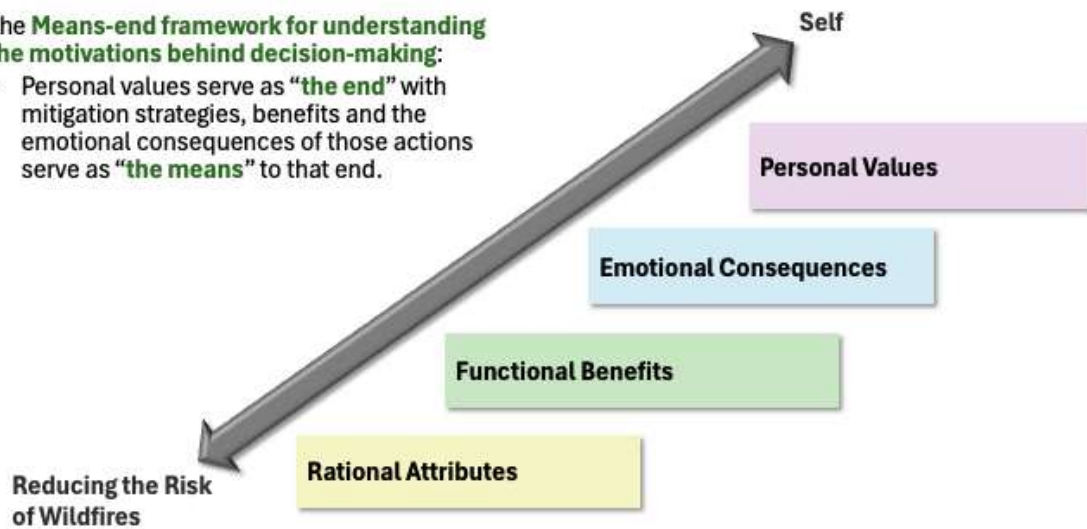
BACKGROUND

This project does two things:

1. Provides a strategic picture, or map, that illustrates how those most affected by wildfires in the Western U.S. think about and act to protect their lifestyle and property.
2. Segments the audience by what motivates them to act and support mitigation efforts. This prescriptive research proves “personal values” transcend regional differences, income levels, and political parties.

The Means-end framework for understanding the motivations behind decision-making:

- Personal values serve as “the end” with mitigation strategies, benefits and the emotional consequences of those actions serve as “the means” to that end.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This strategic research process provides a visual depiction of how people who live in Regions 1-6 think about wildfires and the impact on their lives. These are called “thought pathways.” Importantly, this work identifies how these residents connect the rational elements of mitigation strategies to their personal emotions and values.

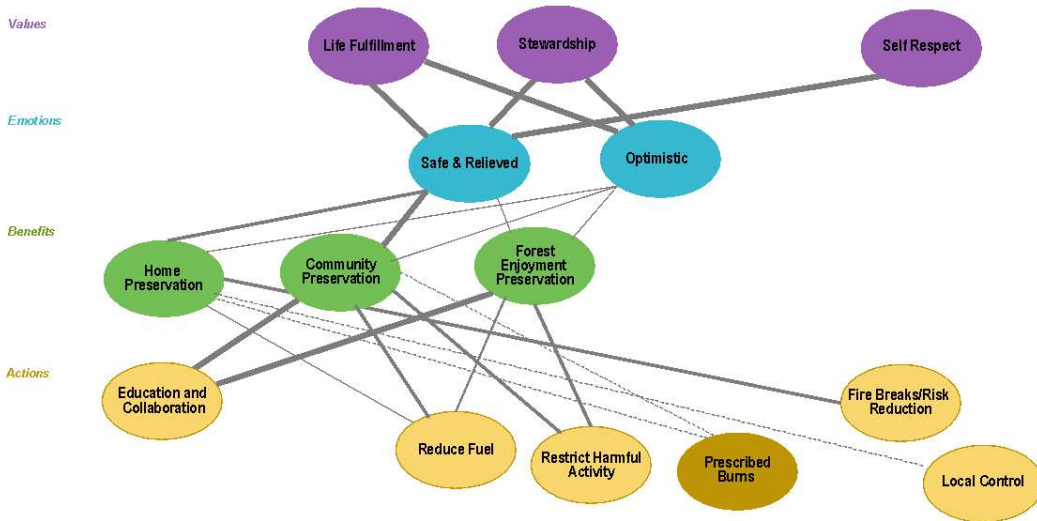
Key Findings:

- By combining a couple of pathways of thought, which we call a hybrid pathway, it unites 68% of diverse individuals through rational and emotional connections, making it possible to build relationships with a critical political mass while addressing individual needs first and foremost. Data that supports the point that this is highly personal includes:
 - o Those who live in regions 1-6 feel a strong connection to forest lands, and nine out of 10 say forests are key to their personal happiness.
 - o Eight out of 10 have been impacted in some way by wildfires and three out of 10 experienced significant loss.
 - o This strong connection to the forest and negative experiences with fire result in consistent and sustained worry about the danger of uncontrolled fires to their health, property, and local community.
- Many of the respondents want to do something, but two-thirds of those who live in a WUI do not know what to do to protect their property.
- Most concerning is that a majority of people do not even know that the USFS has a plan or what the plan is.

Hybrid Pathway

This hybrid pathway combines the benefits of preservation of home, community, and forest enjoyment depicted in green in the chart below, to reach 68% of the population.

Hybrid Pathway: Preservation of Home, Community and Forest Enjoyment Through Active Management - 68%



- Because the hybrid pathway reflects the common decision-making process to support the USFS plan, and after elaboration on prescribed burns and other mitigation techniques, you can message all of the plan's actions because they are simply a means to an end.
 - Communication strategies and messages should start the conversation at the benefit level because it opens the door to adoption of the attributes and taps into the emotions and personal values that drive decision-making. Specific benefits are helpful because of the general lack of understanding of the USFS strategy.
 - People need to feel "safe" before they can feel "optimistic," but both are powerful emotions that lead to higher order values. Relieving pressures on the landscape relieves pressures on people, thus, what is safe for the landscape is safe for the people.

Images and Language Choices

There are at least two principles to best utilize the results of this quantitative research study:

1. Words matter.
 - a. Instead of "threat of wildfire" use "protecting our land, air, water and way of life."

- b. Instead of “prescribed burns,” call it “ways to reduce the fuel” and make it part of a more cohesive, safe, and efficient strategy for preserving landscaped-based communities.
 - c. Instead of “mitigating risk” use “caring for your beautiful backyard and the way of life it comes with.”
 - d. Build a WE mentality to indicate the collaboration that is critical to achieve the goals.
 - e. Reframe thinning and prescribed burns as part of the solution, not mitigation.
2. Actualization is best to describe Emotions and Values
- a. Do not use the actual words of “optimism/safe and relieved,” but instead be descriptive in a way that the audience feels hopeful and safe. Use symbols and cues to convey these powerful ideas.
 - b. Make the USFS an arm of personal forest preservation, rather than the opposite. USFS is an agent of the people rather than an agency of the government. E.g. “This is our goal, this is what we do together, how we do it, and what I get out of it.”
 - c. Message the negatives as positives to deliver benefits of protecting our landscapes.
 - d. Preserving these resources for future generations and leading a more fulfilling life.

Conclusions

- It is a problem that needs a solution—the forest touches every part of their life.
- High agreement on what the problem is, but a split on how to deal with it. Therefore, a high-level need for education.
- High level of trust of the people responsible to implement the plan at the local, state, and federal levels.
- The research allows us to divide the population into pro (who is supportive), anti (who is opposed), and swing groups (those in the middle who are persuadable), so it can help focus messaging that motivates:
 - The two foundational questions for this segmentation are:
 - What is the level of confidence in the USFS to address the problem?
 - Who are the individuals that do not support or are unsure about the USFS risk mitigation approach?
 - The USFS has almost twice as many supporters for their plan as opponents.
 - This is a collaborative effort including firefighters, USFS *and* others that need to work together.
 - To move the persuadable swing group, focus education and communications efforts on building support for the plan including the necessity of prescribed burns, thinning and logging to attain important benefits.

DRAFT