



Forest Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



# Rocky Mountain Research Station Science You Can Use *(in 5 minutes)*

JUNE 2024

## The Devil Is in the Details: Understanding community acceptance of fuels treatments

Public support is crucial for successful fuels management, but vocal opposition can mask broader yet quieter community acceptance. It is helpful for land managers to have a picture of all perspectives, not just the most vocal ones. And what do communities think about fuels treatments?

To answer this question, Rocky Mountain Research Station (RMRS) economist Patricia Champ and her colleagues with the Wildfire Research (WiRē) team considered data about public acceptance of fuels treatment from [studies of 13 communities](#) in the Western US. The studies were conducted using the WiRē Approach, a systematic census of the social and biophysical conditions for an entire community.

Champ and colleagues found that public acceptance varies not only across types of management practice but also by community. A striking example of these differences is attitudes about prescribed burns. Broadly speaking, while most respondents in both Ashland, Oregon, and a community in the Wasatch Range, Utah, accepted prescribed



*Members of the Forest Service use chainsaws to conduct hand thinning. A survey replicated across 13 local communities at risk from wildfire showed that attitudes toward this and other fuels treatment can differ markedly from one community to another. USDA Forest Service photo by Madeline Bautista.*

burns, the level of acceptance differed markedly. The percentage of respondents who found this practice extremely, very, or moderately acceptable was 90 percent in Ashland but only 56 percent in the Wasatch Range.

However, a closer look at the extremes tells another story. In Ashland, 5 percent of respondents found prescribed burns “not at all acceptable” but in Wasatch, attitudes are quite different: 25 percent of respondents were completely opposed. The other extreme shows an even

greater disparity. The percent of respondents who saw prescribed burns as “extremely acceptable” was 52 percent in Ashland but only 11 percent in Wasatch. Thus, while both communities find prescribed burns acceptable to some degree, the nature of that “some degree” is different. Similarly, attitudes varied across all 13 communities for this method, though less dramatically, and the pattern of acceptance across communities was different for each of the four methods surveyed. The full results for each of the 13 studies are reported in the “Living With Wildfire” series



Rocky Mountain Research Station

published by Rocky Mountain Research Station ([Wildfire Research Team](#) | [US Forest Service Research and Development](#)).

With this kind of nuanced data, a land manager faced with vocal opposition might make different decisions depending on the community context. “Well-designed social science research can help shape managers’ thinking about how they approach community engagement and design communication campaigns. Managers can build programs and policies that consider the preferences of representative local populations rather than a vocal minority,” says Champ. For example, managers could choose to begin a fuels management program with the practice that the *local* community finds most acceptable. By starting with the most acceptable treatments and working through conversation and communication, the managers and community build understanding and trust, perhaps shifting local attitudes over time toward other types of treatments.

Champ emphasizes the importance of seeking broader input: “Managers might benefit from understanding the full local context. This means using social science principles to gather data from the whole community, including people who would never attend a meeting or speak up publicly.”



## Key Findings/Management Implications

- Surveys of 13 communities at risk of wildfire showed that public acceptance varies not only across types of fuels management practices but also by community.
- Planning and implementation of fuels treatments can benefit from understandings of public acceptability.
- Systematic social surveys can provide managers with representative data to complement existing methods for gathering public comments related to acceptance of fuels management projects.
- Detailed data can show not only who accepts or doesn’t accept fuels treatment, but whose acceptance could shift towards support or opposition, providing a fuller picture.
- Understanding the fuller picture can provide the opportunity for managers to be more strategic with communications and engagements.

## Further Reading

Brenkert-Smith, H.; Goolsby, J.B.; Champ, P.A.; Meldrum, J.R.; Donovan, C.; Wagner, C.; Barth, C.M.; Forester, C.; Wittenbrink, S. 2023. [The devil is in the details: Variation in public acceptance of fuels treatments across western fire-prone communities](#). Western Economics Forum. 21(2): 5–23.

Champ, P.; Barth, C.; Brenkert-Smith, H.; Falk, L.; Gomez, J.; Meldrum, J. 2021. [Putting people first: Using social science to reduce risk](#). Wildfire Magazine (International Association of Wildland Fire). 30(2): 30–35.

## Lead Scientist

**Patricia Champ** is an Economist with the [Human Dimensions Program](#) at Rocky Mountain Research Station. Her wildfire research focuses on the intersection of community wildfire education programs and residents’ risk mitigating and wildfire preparation behaviors. Champ is a Wildfire Research Center (WiRē) Advisory Committee member.

**Jane Marie Andrew** is the author of this Science You Can Use in 5 Minutes.

*Fire fighters conduct a prescribed fire burn. Well-constructed local surveys can support a nuanced strategy for fuels management that is more likely to be acceptable to the community. USDA Forest Service photo.*

The Rocky Mountain Research Station is one of seven units within USDA Forest Service Research & Development. RMRS maintains 14 field laboratories throughout a 12-state geography encompassing parts of the Great Basin, Southwest, Rocky Mountains, and the Great Plains. While anchored in the geography of the West, our research is global in scale. RMRS also administers and conducts research on 14 experimental forests, ranges and watersheds and maintains long-term research databases for these areas. Our science improves lives and landscapes. More information about Forest Service research in the Rocky Mountain Region can be found here: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/rmrs/>.

[Click Here To](#)  
**SUBSCRIBE**  
To Future SYCU

