



OPINION  
RESEARCH  
& STRATEGY

**TO** Interested Parties

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FM3 Research

**RE:** Messaging Recommendations for Improving Forest Health, Water Protection and Wildfire Resilience

**DATE** April 2, 2019

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Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz and Associates (FM3) completed six focus groups in February 2019 in three locations near national forests across the rural West (Wenatchee, WA; Buena Vista, CO; and Flagstaff, AZ) in order to better understand the connections voters in these types of communities make between forest health and clean water and wildfire prevention, and to assess their willingness to support dedicating additional funding for these purposes. This qualitative research was undertaken by The Trust for Public Land with a generous grant from the US Endowment for Forestry and Communities, and in partnership with the National Forest Foundation and Carpe Diem West.

## Key Findings

Focus group participants in these places valued forests for a variety of benefits they provide, ranging from the spiritual to the economic. **They saw prevention of wildfires -- and wildfire smoke specifically -- as a compelling rationale for additional investment in forest conservation and health.** They placed the blame for larger, more-intense and more-frequent wildfires on poor management, specifically fuel build-up after decades of a not allowing forests to burn in a “natural” way. They also pointed to overuse and misuse by humans for starting the fires in the first place. Climate change was much farther down a list of causes or concerns.

Participants in these communities cared deeply about the immediate need to protect the air they breathe, the recreational sites they cherish, and the habitat these places provide for plants and animals. They were willing to support additional local funding for forest health, wildfire resilience and protection of water if they could be assured that the money would be raised fairly and spent efficiently. Controlled burns, clearing dead and downed wood, providing more public education on fire prevention, and restoring streams and rivers all seemed like common-sense approaches. There was less understanding of how limits to development in the wildland urban interface would make a difference.

Participants could see reasons for investing in improving forest health, even if that forest was federal. More than anything else, they saw an urgent need to act and had an appetite for increased coordination among stakeholders of every stripe, public and private.

## Methodology

Pairs of two-hour focus groups were conducted in each of three locations: Wenatchee, WA; Buena Vista, CO; and Flagstaff, AZ. These three areas were chosen because they are each surrounded by significant forested lands managed by federal, state, local and private entities, and each affected by wildfire. In addition, each has a different history of approving local funding for the purposes of forest management. Flagstaff voters approved a Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project measure in 2012, while voters in Chaffee County, CO (Buena Vista) approved a measure in 2018. A local measure has not yet been attempted in Wenatchee, but a state wildfire prevention fund is under discussion. Blue highlighted text denotes actual language presented to participants during the focus group.

**Figure 1: Forest Health, Water Protection and Wildfire Resilience Group Composition**

Location	Date	Demographic	Group Size
Wenatchee, WA	Feb. 4, 2019	Within city limits	8
Wenatchee, WA	Feb. 4, 2019	Outside city limits	7
Buena Vista, CO	Feb. 13, 2019	Long-term residents of Chaffee County	10
Buena Vista, CO	Feb. 13, 2019	Newcomers to Chaffee County	10
Flagstaff, AZ	Feb. 19, 2019	Conservative/moderate Republicans	10
Flagstaff, AZ	Feb. 19, 2019	Liberal/moderate Democrats	10

Within each demographic grouping, participants were recruited to reflect the demographic balance of their communities by age, ethnicity, ideology, education, income, and geography (providing a mix of truly rural vs. small-town residents). Anyone with especially strong feelings about regulation, climate change, and the timber industry was screened out.

*Qualitative* research like focus groups does not measure directly the frequency by which opinions and attitudes may exist within a particular universe of people. However, they do provide helpful insights into language, core values and the “why” behind their opinions, and represent a good starting place for future *quantitative* research in a given jurisdiction.

## Rural and Small-Town Western Context

Participants valued a way of life deeply connected to the outdoors – and the sense of community they feel in their rural and small-town settings.

*If somebody is in trouble here, if a family loses their home to a fire or something of that nature, people step up and they offer to aid that person or that family. -- Wenatchee Woman*

At the same time, they wanted change. Asked about their top concerns, the cost of living – specifically affordable housing – came up in every group. They were concerned that the available jobs can't support the ever-increasing prices people migrating from the metro areas (e.g. retirees and young professionals) can pay when they move to enjoy the outdoor quality of life. They worried that their children and grandchildren will be forced to move away to places that can offer good-paying jobs, losing their connection with the land. Narrowing the question to environmental concerns, participants brought up wildfire and water conservation as major issues, even if they were not initially top-of-mind in February.

### **Attitudes About Forests and Water**

Participants had deep connections to the outdoors. Many hunt, fish, hike, ski, kayak, run, and participate in other activities in forests and on the waters near them. They had made many fond memories with family and friends in these places, and to a person, they cited proximity to the outdoors as a reason they love living where they do. When they thought of forests, their emotions were largely variations on the themes of calm, peace, relaxation and renewal. They pictured green, quiet spaces (often on a mountainside, with water near or running through it), named specific trees, and saw themselves in those scenes relaxing or taking in the natural beauty.

*I like the pine trees, the blue sky. I love it when the wind blows and you can smell campfires. It brings back good memories as a child . – Flagstaff Woman*

They perceived numerous benefits of forests, including clean air, wildlife habitat, timber (as a source of jobs and engine of the economy, if one of decreasing importance), tourism (for outsiders and as a source of jobs), and recreation (for themselves). They recognized forest pests (like the pine beetle in Colorado) as threats, as well as human overuse and new development.

The connection between forests and clean water wasn't immediate; participants need to be prompted to acknowledge it as a benefit that forests provide. But upon reflection, most understood that forests prevent erosion and naturally filter water. Several remembered vividly occasions when erosion after a fire turned a river or stream brown with sediment.

*Before a fire, you can see down the canyon and it's mostly clear and looking good. After a big rain and after a fire? Chocolate milk. – Buena Vista Man*

The biggest threats participants saw to water quality had to do with pollution and drought (lack of snowpack in some years). They did not have a detailed understanding of who is “in charge” of their water, beyond some government agency or water company. When the question was broadened to who has responsibility for keeping it clean, most said “everyone” has their part. Those who depended on wells for their drinking water had less of a sense of how forest health might impact their personal supplies, though a better sense of where their water comes from than those with a water company. Still, most respondents eventually got the connection with discussion.

*But, if you don't have a healthy forest, you don't have healthy water. – Flagstaff woman*

Several understood the wildland-urban interface as an issue both for loss of wildlife habitat and potential for fire; others were concerned that increasing development regardless of where it is sited will put pressure on increasingly precarious water supplies, but they did not talk about the “wildland-urban interface” as such.

*Forests are a home for wildlife. We keep crowding them out. We have got to keep some for them. People keep complaining because these bears and cougars are coming into their backyards. Well, they were here first. There is not much thought put into where they put these housing developments. -- Wenatchee Woman*

*It goes without saying that we are living deeper in the forests than we used to. Paradise, California, that we all became too familiar with ... it didn't exist 30 years ago. – Buena Vista Woman*

### Attitudes about Wildfire

Voters in these places understood fire as natural, and broadly had the sense that we've put out too many fires in the last few decades, leading to the buildup of too much fuel. There was a sense that "nature should take its course," at least to the extent that it does not threaten property or life.

*Wildfires are sort of natural to happen. We have been staving them off for a while. It is a scary thing to deal with, but it is natural rejuvenation for the forests. – Buena Vista Woman*

At the same time, participants (with a few exceptions) recognized that wildfires are getting more intense and larger. They understood that human activity (like abandoned campfires or cigarettes thrown out windows) starts most fires, and that recreational overuse of forests made wildfire incidents more common. They were divided on whether climate change was a cause for these larger, more-intense fires – and even for those who thought there was a connection, the mechanism connecting climate change and fires was hazy.

*People are a major threat. That first camping weekend, I go out there and put out at least two campfires people have left going. They trash the areas. Trash them. – Flagstaff Woman*

Unhealthy air quality was by far the most salient and immediate impact of wildfires (see Figure 2 on the next page). Everyone in the focus groups had a recent experience with smoke from a wildfire, near or far (as in the case of British Columbia fire smoke settling in Wenatchee) impacting their daily lives. Most had a close tie to someone who has respiratory issues – and as one participant put it, everyone breathes: “air quality effects absolutely everybody.” Given a list of “fire facts,” one on the impact on public health (below) was especially striking to participants.

**FIRE FACT:** A new study simulating the effects of wildfire smoke on human health anticipates increased wildfire activity to worsen air quality over the coming decades. The number of human deaths from chronic inhalation of wildfire smoke could increase to more than 40,000 per year by the end of the 21st century, up from around 15,000 per year today.

Damage to wildlife habitat was seen as among the most likely impacts of fires (see Figure 2 on the next page) as most participants intimately associated forested lands with habitat for animals and plants. Impacts on tourism and recreation were clear to them as well, but again, this was tied in large part to smoke from wildfires keeping

visitors away. These two items fit into a second tier of medium-term impacts, as participants imagined the ways the landscape would change after a burn.

When it came to the likelihood of various consequences of fires, they thought extremely locally, literally and specifically about destruction of property and loss of life – anyone not directly bordering forest land felt safe, and even those with nearby trees were fairly confident their property would be protected. The fires they could recall had only led to the deaths of firefighters, which they saw as a tragic but not totally avoidable consequence. As a result, few saw large-scale loss of life as a likely outcome despite awareness of recent fatalities in California wildfires.

**Figure 2: Most Likely Impacts of a Wildfire**

*Here you’ll see a list of potential impacts of a wildfire. Please take a moment to read through them and rate how likely you think each impact is to occur during the next wildfire near you: very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely, or not likely at all.*

Possible Impact	# of Participants Calling it “Very Likely”
The air quality will become unhealthy	42
Wildlife habitat will be severely damaged	28
The local economy in things like tourism and recreation would be hurt	24
Agricultural land and livestock would be damaged	13
Key transportation modes would be impacted	11
My community’s water supply would be threatened	9
People would die	3
My property would be destroyed	3

At the same time, many had thought seriously about their personal plans for evacuation. Participants in some sites noted that there are just two routes out of the community in an emergency; as a result, some said they are ready to leave and keep an emergency kit in their trunk all summer long. For those who know that they live near fire-prone forested land, many said they have done clearing, or worked with assessments like Firewise to make changes to keep their homes safer.

*I made my decision on buying a house based on well, Lake Mary is here, the freeway is there, the airport is there, so we have breaks when the fire may come. That made my decision. – Flagstaff Woman*

Given a list of potential benefits of action to protect and improve forest health (with deaths from smoke inhalation and flooding included), preserving human life became more salient (see Figure 3). When asked to prioritize these benefits, each participant tried to choose the most essential benefits, those which – if prioritized – would very likely result in securing other benefits on the list as well.

*If you don't have [forest] health, you lose out on a lot of this other stuff. You lose out on tourists coming up to spend money, spending summers here. If the air quality isn't good, they are not going to come here, and the ones that do will have breathing issues. – Buena Vista Woman*

**Figure 3: Benefits of Forest Health**

*On the wall, you'll see a list of potential benefits of action on forest health that people have mentioned. In front of you there are three dots. I'd like you to take a moment and place them on the ones that matter most to you.*

Benefit of Protecting Forest Health	Times Ranked in Top Three
Protecting air quality and health in the region	24
Protecting homes and businesses from the threat of catastrophic wildfire	23.5
Preventing human deaths due to wildfires, flooding and smoke inhalation	17
Preventing damage to drinking water quality	14
Preserving outdoor recreation opportunities like hunting, fishing and hiking	14
Protecting wildlife habitat for threatened and endangered species	12
Preserving trees which remove the carbon pollution that causes climate change from the air	11
Saving taxpayer money that would be spent on disaster clean-up	10
Limiting or preventing damage to infrastructure such as roads, power lines and cell phone towers	7
Preventing damage to the local economy due to reduced tourism and outdoor recreation opportunities	7
Creating jobs in forest management	4.5
Saving taxpayer money that would be spent fighting fires	2
Limiting or preventing damage to outdoor recreation infrastructure like trails, campgrounds and boat launches	2
Preserving scenic views	1

While it wasn't rated an urgent priority compared with health, the need to protect jobs in recreation given these areas' dependence on tourism hit home. Even those who were dismayed by tourists overrunning their towns and favorite outdoor spots understood that visitors support the businesses and tax base they depend on, too. They have less of a direct connection or understanding of jobs in forest management.

*It is good to give us some jobs here that isn't having to sling burgers. – Buena Vista Woman*

*I think every single one of those things is about how we live personally and why people come up here to visit us. It really is how dependent we are on it. – Buena Vista Woman*

### Attitudes Toward Local Funding for Federal and State Forests

In the groups, we probed voters' mindsets on support for local funding to protect nearby forests, regardless of ownership. Just about everyone agreed something must be done – and if federal officials don't meet their responsibility, state and local government should make sure the job gets done. Participants wanted to see investments in prevention – and viewed enhanced public education and cross-sector coordination as key. The base-case policy proposal tested in each group is reflected below (though there were minor edits as we learned more from each group). In Wenatchee, we proposed a statewide fund.

#### Figure 4: Policy Proposal Tested

*On this page, you will find a brief description of a proposal dealing with wildfire protection. After reading the description, please indicate below whether you support or oppose the creation of this fund in (Wenatchee/Chaffee/Coconino County), and write a few words about why.*

Major forest fires pose a significant risk to our area – our health, safety, homes, water supply, economy and transportation system. As severe fires become more frequent, the risk becomes greater. There is an ongoing need to do more to restore and maintain the health of the forest at a level that will protect our communities – by cutting overgrown brush and trees that act as fuel for future fires; with controlled, prescribed fires that will remove fuel that could lead to a severe wildfire; and by preventing development on lands near natural areas where fire risks are high. The lands that need to be treated in these ways cut across boundaries, and include federal, state, and local lands; and while the U.S. Forest Service does some of this work now, more must be done to protect our forests and water.

Some people have proposed bringing together private and public partners in an innovative, proactive project to protect vital forests and water sources in [WENATCHEE/CHAFFEE COUNTY/FLAGSTAFF]. Large-scale restoration and conservation of forests would include projects like thinning overgrown forests, restoring streams, preventing development in fire-prone areas, and rehabilitating areas that flood after wildfires. These projects will diminish the threat and intensity of future wildfires, improve wildlife habitat, protect our water, and reduce risks to lives, property, and our local economy.

The project would have the goal of generating ongoing funding for a 20-year program. It will require millions of dollars per year in local funding to restore millions of acres of overgrown forests, many of them on federal lands. This local investment will bring in additional federal dollars for this work on public lands, so every dollar invested is maximized to treat additional lands and waters.

The proposal was vague about the source of its funding, and respondents zeroed in on that. Many assumed this would mean increasing their taxes – which provoked significant skepticism. The phrase “public-private partnership” also worried some, who suspected that private actors would surely have some monetary interest that could conflict with their values. Initially, most had no objection to using state or local funding to solve a problem located on federal land.

*We have to figure out a way to gain control of these wildfires that have just been raging. I don't want to end up where California is. ... But where is the money going to come from? I don't know about everybody but most of us in eastern Washington, we struggle. A lot of things that get passed are for the western side. -- Wenatchee Woman*

Ultimately, identifying the right funding mechanism at the right amount will require research specific to the community. However, the broad-based funding ideas presented in the groups (such as a surcharge on insurance or property tax) did not generate much enthusiasm, despite virtually all 55 participants’ willingness to pay in principle. Largely, they felt that their property taxes are already too high, even as incomes are too low for many. Hearing that the price tag at the household level would be as little as about \$17 per year made it much more palatable, but voters were still skeptical of the necessity of generating any new tax revenue even though the benefits of improved forest health were important.

*We already pay a million dollars in taxes. I'm exaggerating, but it is expensive to live. I don't pretend to know how to fix it, but I do know there is a lot of money being spent already that might be able to be used in a different way. -- Wenatchee Man*

## **Forest Health Treatments and Concerns**

Participants clearly believed that current forest management practices are not working, and that they will need to be modified and adjusted to address what they saw as years of neglect and mismanagement. They were offered a list of forest management activities that could be introduced or expanded in order to more effectively reduce fire risks, and were asked to prioritize them.

*We have reactionary forest policy. Maybe at first it was too beneficial to the logging industry. But then it swung the other way, where we're going to protect the spotted owl and not find compromise. Now we're talking millions of acres burning a year, and we never had that much. -- Wenatchee Man*

Educating the public about fire prevention was seen as a key part of the response. This included things like educating visitors and young people on campfire safety, as well as individualized assessments similar to Firewise. Some recognized that the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and other agencies already provided this kind of training and education, but everyone wanted such efforts to be more broadly publicized.

*[Fire management] has to be a combination. They are spending so much fighting fires. But enlisting communities like they did with the pine beetle is a good example of how it could have been worse, but education made a difference. Free workshops where you can figure out how to identify risks on your property and what to do. It is not any one person's job. -- Buena Vista Woman*

Participants broadly supported removing excess brush and dead and downed trees, but wanted to see people able to harvest it to heat their homes or sell. The smoke from these slash piles was not a huge concern.

*When I was young, we all had fireplaces and we kept the forest clean. We kept the ground cover clean because we burned it. You could go anywhere as long as it was public land and harvest dead trees. It does no harm to the ecology, it doesn't hurt any animals, and it gives you heat for the winter. That has become nearly impossible. The BLM now instead does a big burn up in the canyon and fills it with smoke. – Buena Vista Man*

Proposals like shoring up wetlands and stream areas to prevent erosion and sediment were appealing on their own. The idea of forests being “natural filters” for water quality was intuitive, though (as noted before) not top-of-mind.

Support for controlled burns was not overwhelming, but broadly and generally seen as good. (“It’s part of life now.”) Participants didn’t much care who does the burns as long as they are professionals. They preferred smaller sections burned over time to a larger burn that would be more disruptive but be finished more quickly.

Limits on development in the WUI provoked concern for some participants, who objected that people need somewhere to live and their cities are already growing more crowded. Others understand the connection between development limits and fire prevention, but expressed concerns about what that actually means, and whether government was overstepping its boundaries and encroaching on private property rights.

*And there was some really poorly thought out building – Wenatchee Man*

*Sometimes you have to let nature take its course too. When a fire happens, you have to let them happen, too. People are building in places that you can't, you shouldn't. – Wenatchee Woman*

*It goes without saying that we are living deeper in the forests than we used to. Paradise, California, that you all became too familiar with didn't exist 30 years ago. That is a new town. – Buena Vista Man*

Participants stressed that notifying the public about planned forest treatments should take place through a variety of media. Newspaper notices, radio updates, text message, reverse 911, social media and signs along the road were all recalled as useful in the past and desired in the future.

## **Messaging Recommendations**

In sum, the focus groups suggest the following brief “do” and “don’t” guidelines for talking about forest management in the rural West:

- **DO keep language and messages about forests personal, visceral and local.** Forests are not an abstract concept for residents of these communities – they are the places where they play, work, relax, and reflect. Messaging should use language and visuals to evoke those personal and emotional connections that residents of these communities have to nearby forests.

- **DO reflect local residents’ core value of stewardship.** Forests are places where residents of these communities raise their children and grandchildren, and they hope to pass healthy forests along to them. At the same time, they understand the natural world as innately seeking balance, and largely want to respect the plants and animals who have made the forested lands near them home. The value of stewardship – leaving something in a condition at least as good as you found it – is broadly shared. A simple message reinforcing this ranked among the most persuasive of any shown in all three groups.

**MESSAGE:** We have a responsibility to take care of our land, water, and wildlife for future generations. Local wildfire and water source protection funding will provide a legacy of healthy forests and clean water for our children and grandchildren.

- **DO focus on the public-health benefits of maintaining forest health.** There was widespread concern about smoke, and frequently not full understanding how widespread that smoke really was beyond their particular region or even valley. The impacts of smoke on public health broadly concerned them specifically, because nearly everyone is someone or knows someone with a respiratory illness. People in these communities had already experienced shutting their windows on a warm summer day, feeling their eyes water and sting, or even leaving town because of smoke. And to put it simply, everyone breathes. A message along these lines was highly compelling, as shown below.

**MESSAGE:** The trees in our forests filter our air and water to keep them clean and healthy. Washington/Colorado/Arizona’s forests are critical to our public health, and water funds will protect the forest and our water. In addition, limiting the impacts of wildfires saves lives. Breathing the smoke from wildfires is worse than smoking a few packs of cigarettes per day and presents a significant health risk to people with respiratory illness.

- **DO NOT overstate risks to human life.** Participants understood that it is very rare for a wildfire to result in large loss of human life, and that those who are most immediately in harm’s way are largely firefighters for whom this is part of the work. Most were confident that in the event of a fires, most people would be able to protect themselves. While they want to protect human life, they do not feel it is the most likely outcome of a wildfire.
- **DO validate and reinforce the growing fire risks voters see as happening around them.** Participants were intimately aware that wildfires are becoming more frequent and more intense. A straightforward fact about the increasing length of fire season (below) had the rare effect of seeming both surprising and true.

**FIRE FACT:** Fire seasons are now 105 days longer in the western U.S. than they were in the 1970s.

- **DO focus on a changing climate, NOT on “climate change.”** While many understand that the weather is changing and becoming less predictable, not everyone ascribes this to climate change. Framing the issue as

an impact of a changing global climate takes it out of the personal, local realm in which people feel they can make an impact and also puts it into a more sharply partisan space. This is not helpful in building support for local solutions to local problems. Instead, acknowledging the increasing risk of frequent, intense fires – whatever the cause -- is a more broadly appealing approach. An effective articulation of this idea is shown below.

**MESSAGE:** Frequent fire is normal in [state]’s forests, but changes in tree density and summer temperatures over the last century are causing wildfires to burn hotter. Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in major wildfires. We need to take action now to prepare for these growing wildfire risks, because the more fires and burned areas we have, the more vulnerable our communities will be.

- **DO emphasize the critical role of fire prevention.** People in these communities understand the value of prevention, especially when it comes to an emergency like wildfire and smoke. They intuitively understand and agree with messages asserting that spending money in the short-term will make long-term harms less likely. Although they aren’t sure what should be spent, providing numbers to document this dynamic (and showing that the Forest Service is spending more than half on response rather than prevention) is powerful.

**FIRE FACT:** In 2017, the U.S. Forest Service spent almost \$2.9 billion to put out fires nationwide. That's more than the \$2.1 billion spent in 2015. Firefighting consumed 52% of its budget.

In fact, a message stressing the costs of prevention versus reaction, with specific numbers, was rated one of the three most persuasive messages by 20 of the 55 participants, and fully 10 made it their top choice.

**MESSAGE:** Investment in fire prevention is more cost-effective than being reactive to damaging wildfires. Thinning one acre of dense forest costs on average \$700, whereas the cost of damaging wildfire is up to \$2,150 per acre – everything from clean-up costs, reduced tourism, and higher insurance rates. Paying a little now means we can avoid paying a lot later.

*Spending the money now is tiny compared to what we would spend in a state of emergency. -- Wenatchee Man*

*No one likes more taxes, but inevitably to solve some problems we have to get the money from somewhere. If they really did all this [proposal], it would outweigh the expense of fighting our fires and protecting people and property in the first place. – Flagstaff Man*

- **DO leverage concern about water quality and supply.** Even if voters don’t connect water quality to forests intuitively, they are concerned about water quality and water supply. It doesn’t take a great deal of prompting to move voters to draw the connection between forest health and water quality.
- **DO recognize the importance of protecting wildlife habitat.** Voters value it, see growth as threatening it, and believe that fires will put it further at risk. They want habitat protected both for its own sake, and also because

it supports the animals they hunt and fish. In addition, they see protecting habitat as likely to help secure many other environmental benefits they value, such as clean water and clean air.

**MESSAGE:** Healthy forests—those that are not so dense or overgrown—store more snowpack and release more water to streams, leading to more durable forests and possibly increased stream flows. This provides habitat for fish and wildlife and protects them from damaging wildfire, flooding, and ash-flows that often follow high-severity burns. An investment in water funding helps protect the fish and animals that call Washington/ Colorado/Arizona home—native and game.

- **DO stress that continued rapid growth of local cities is likely to increase, rather than reduce, fire risks.** While voters aren't aware of the specific phrase "wildland-urban interface," they have a baseline impression that there are many negative impacts of growth and expansion of even small cities. They understand that the more we build in and around forests, the potential for more fires – and greater cost and damage when they occur – rises.
- **DO build from the widespread perception that forests are overgrown, and DO advocate for continued use of controlled burns and selective thinning.** Participants were familiar with this practice, largely comfortable with it, and find it effective. They broadly already understood forests as suffering from a buildup of fuel; removing it seems a straightforward solution. Communication with the public is key.
- **DO highlight examples of cooperation and planning.** Mistrust of government at every level – and the sense that taxes are high enough already that they should already have the money to work on these issues – was felt in all three locations. Presenting forest management plans as collaborative and innovative ways to augment existing resources and make them go farther is an appealing framework. Participants felt much more connected to local government (such as the county) than to federal agencies, who are seen as unresponsive and lacking understanding of local conditions. However, federal agencies have more resources, creating the need for coordination. The message below was ranked in the top three most persuasive messages by 21 of the total 55 participants.

**MESSAGE:** Managing healthy forests and watersheds requires coordination among nonprofits, private companies, tribes, irrigation districts, water utilities, fire managers, and government at every level. Local funding can help ensure these groups bring their expertise to bear across multiple boundaries, ensuring healthy, clean watersheds from ridgetop to river bottom.

*You're taking everyone and getting everyone's buy-in. If everyone is buying into the plan, you're taking the strong parts of everyone and making something really good. – Buena Vista Woman*

- **DO make a careful case for spending state and local dollars to improve health of national forest lands.** Initially, voters were fine with this proposal as reflected in the message below.

**MESSAGE:** The health of our drinking water and our safety from wildfires depend on protecting and restoring large areas of public land – from ridgetop to river bottom – that cut across many different boundaries. These areas include federal land, state land, and local land – and no one agency can take care of it all. That’s why we need a wildfire protection fund – so that we can be more efficient and effective in developing one coordinated plan to protect our communities.

However, voters were also receptive to the idea that the federal government should be held accountable for funding proper management of its own forest land – even if there is no realistic prospect that such funding will be provided. A pre-emptive message like the one above may help inoculate against cynical counter-messaging from opponents.

- **DO highlight successful forest management collaborations in other communities.** Each community understood its forest ecosystem and related industries and uses as unique – but participants all wanted to see how the collaborative approach being proposed has worked elsewhere. Demonstrating that better coordination and planning can have a positive impact on communities in the West is persuasive, even if the particulars are different from their own individual community.
- **DO stress the low per-household cost of a fire prevention program.** While there was anxiety around broad-based funding mechanisms proposed, and baseline concern about taxes, participants knew that they might be asked to contribute. There was a high willingness to pay at low amounts – stating the relatively low per-household cost clearly up-front can help voters see that while they may have to pay a little more, it is well within what the benefits are worth to them. For example, the message below was ranked in the top three 20 times across 55 respondents, and 10 ranked it first.

**MESSAGE:** Investment in fire prevention is more cost-effective than being reactive to damaging wildfires. Thinning one acre of dense forest costs on average \$700, whereas the cost of damaging wildfire is up to \$2,150 per acre – everything from clean-up costs, reduced tourism, and higher insurance rates. Paying a little now means we can avoid paying a lot later.

- **DO NOT worry that voters remember past efforts to generate local funding.** There was nearly no awareness of prior voter-approved funding measures in Flagstaff or Buena Vista (Chaffee County), even though the latter had been on the ballot just months before. Reminding participants of these efforts was also not a barrier to winning their support for additional dollars. At the same time, it was clearly important to explain how proposals to generate new funding would dovetail with existing dollars set aside for those purposes.
- **DO NOT lead with economic impacts of forest restoration as a rationale for action.** Neither the long-term economic benefit nor a few dozen near-term jobs in forest restoration were nearly as compelling as habitat and health rationales for forest restoration. Still, because everyone understands the impact of wildfire smoke

and damaged forests on tourism and outdoor recreation in their communities, economic impacts have a role as a secondary message.

- **DO NOT talk about natural areas as “infrastructure.”** Participants simply did not think of or value forests, water and landscapes in the same way as they think of built infrastructure. To them, a mountain forest is far more valuable for its own sake and as wildlife habitat than for the work it does to filter water. While these benefits of nature for people were seen as important, the “infrastructure” metaphor seemed awkward to many participants. In related research, we regularly see that people don’t know exactly what “resilience” means when applied to landscapes. They think of people as resilient, not communities or natural areas.

### **About Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates**

Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3)—a national opinion research firm with offices in Oakland, Los Angeles and Madison, Wisconsin—has specialized in public policy oriented opinion research since 1981. The firm has assisted hundreds of political campaigns at every level of the ballot—from president to city council—with opinion research and strategic guidance. FM3 also provides research and strategic consulting to public agencies, businesses and public interest organizations nationwide.

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The **U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, Inc.** (the “Endowment”) is a not-for-profit corporation that works collaboratively with partners in the public and private sectors to advance systemic, transformative and sustainable change for the health and vitality of the nation’s working forests and forest-reliant communities.

The **Trust for Public Land** creates parks and protects land for people, ensuring healthy, livable communities for generations to come. We’ve been connecting communities to the outdoors—and to each other—since 1972. We also conserve working farms, ranches, and forests; lands of historical and cultural importance; rivers, streams, coasts, and watersheds; and other special places where people can experience nature close at hand.

The **National Forest Foundation**, chartered by Congress, engages Americans in community-based and national programs that promote the health and public enjoyment of the 193-million-acre National Forest System, and administers private gifts of funds and land for the benefit of the National Forests.

**Carpe Diem West** leads a network of diverse Western water leaders. Together, we catalyze innovative, equitable and sustainable responses to water crises as the climate changes in the American West.