| **TO** | Interested Parties |
|---|---|
| **FROM** | Dave Metz<br>FM3 Research |
| | Lori Weigel<br>New Bridge Strategy |
| **RE:** | The Language of Wildfire: Recommendations on Communicating Effectively to Build Support for Sound Wildfire Policies |
| **DATE** | November 28, 2022 |

*The following recommendations for effective communications to build support for sound wildfire policies are based on national qualitative and quantitative opinion research commissioned by The Nature Conservancy in 2022 and conducted by a bipartisan research team: Dave Metz of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (D) and Lori Weigel, of New Bridge Strategy (R).[i] This memo provides a list of easy-to-follow, broad "rules" for communication.*

*It is always prudent to re-test language and messages to ensure their effectiveness in a specific state or local area prior to investing in public communication there. In particular, communities with specific experience with controlled burns or wildfire may have unique concerns that make this broad messaging less applicable.*
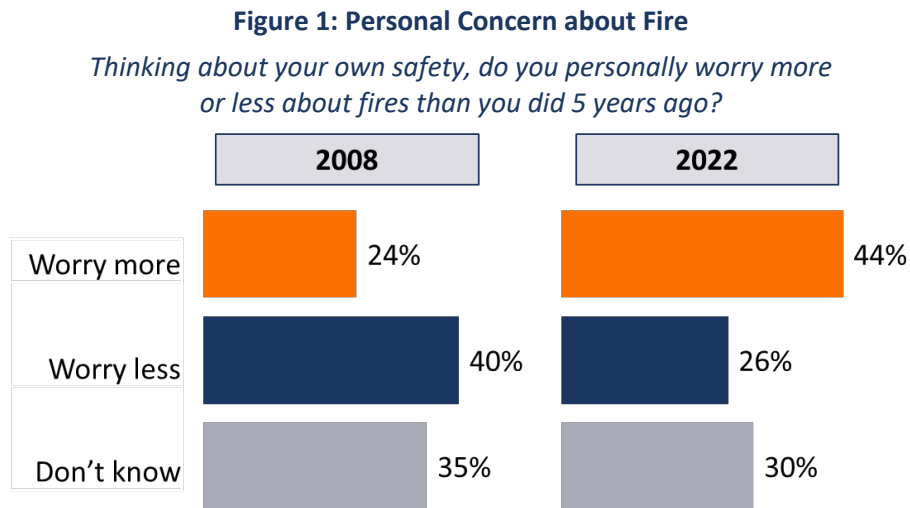
## Summary

In brief, the research shows that voters across the country see forest health as worsening, and concern about wildfires has been steadily growing even among those not directly impacted. Voters overwhelmingly support a framework to reduce severe fire risk through improved forest management and the use of controlled burns – support that cuts across geography, party, gender, age, race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Voters would rather invest now to reduce severe fire risk than invest later to address the aftermath of fires, and voters find investments in year-round, trained teams to reduce the risk of these severe wildfires highly appealing. At the same time, their innate skepticism about government makes it important to document these policies' proven track record, and to highlight provisions requiring accountability and transparency in carrying out risk reduction strategies.

## Recommendations

- **DO build on voters' growing concern that fires are more severe and more frequent.** The share of voters who say they personally worry more about fires than they did five years ago has increased by 20 points nationwide since 2008 – and in the West and Mountain regions, more than three in five are more worried about fire personally than they were five years ago. Given this widespread existing concern, messaging does not need

to persuade voters that a problem exists – rather, it needs to funnel their existing concern into support for action.

**Figure 1: Personal Concern about Fire**

*Thinking about your own safety, do you personally worry more or less about fires than you did 5 years ago?*

| | 2008 | 2022 |
|---|---|---|
| Worry more | 24% | 44% |
| Worry less | 40% | 26% |
| Don't know | 35% | 30% |

The message below (rated "very convincing" by 41% of those polled) effectively reinforces voters' instinct that fires have become larger and more destructive in recent years.

> **(MORE SEVERE)** Frequent fire is normal in most forests, but changes in temperatures and drought are causing wildfires to burn hotter. Severe wildfires continue to set new records for being large, damaging, and deadly; since 2015, the United States has experienced roughly 100 more large wildfires every year than the year before. Mega-fires have burned an area equivalent to the state of Oregon. We need to act now to prepare for these growing wildfire risks.

- **DO NOT rely on concern about wildfire <u>smoke</u> to leverage action.** While poor air quality tends to be a concern when and where problems with wildfire smoke are occurring, as the winds shift and fires die down, intensity of concern does as well. Voters are largely unfamiliar with research demonstrating long-term negative health impacts from wildfire smoke and most consider it more of a passing irritation than a dire threat to their health. Fires themselves are much more durable as a concern because voters perceive their impacts on life and property as both more severe and longer-term.

- **DO NOT count on using climate change as a rationale for action in communications with general audiences.** While a majority rates climate change as an "extremely" or "very serious problem" facing their community, fully 35% dismiss it. And as shown in Figure 2 on the next page, voters rank climate change in the middle-tier of a list of factors contributing to increasingly frequent and severe wildfires. This is because deep ideological polarization continues to play a substantial role in perceptions of climate change; while more and more voters acknowledge it's happening, many on the ideological right maintain that it's not something caused solely by humans and see it as more of a political hot button.

Of course, for some specific audiences (most notably those on the ideological left), climate change is viewed as directly connected to increased fire risk. One-third (34%) of voters see climate change as the "biggest factor" causing wildfires, the highest of any other single factor tested – driven by the fact that 82% of Democrats saw it as the biggest or a major factor. Communications targeted to audiences convinced of the reality of climate change should absolutely center on it as a rationale for action.

**Figure 2: Factors Perceived to Contribute to Increasingly Frequent and Severe Wildfires**

*Here are some factors that may have contributed to increasingly frequent and severe wildfires. Please tell me if you think it is the single biggest factor, a major factor of wildfires, a minor factor, or not a factor.*

| Factor | Biggest/Major Factor |
|---|---|
| Years of drought that left millions of dead trees, creating dry fuel | 73% |
| Careless behavior by people visiting forests | 71% |
| Lack of adequate forest management | 64% |
| Increasingly extreme weather patterns | 60% |
| Increased development in wildfire-prone areas | 60% |
| Climate change | 54% |
| Lack of resources and trained workers to help remove fuels for fire | 52% |
| Faulty or aging electric utility equipment | 50% |
| Population growth | 48% |

- **DO focus on *impacts* of climate change – most notably the contribution of droughts to the greater frequency and severity of fires.** "Years of drought" is seen as the biggest or a major cause of fires by 73% of voters overall (Figure 2 above) and the partisan gap is only 12 points, compared with 51 points for climate change. Even without explicitly naming climate change as the cause, clearly describing its visible, tangible and current impacts on forests and pivoting to how to help them is a relatively effective framing – 39% of voters rated the message below as a "very convincing" reason to support federal investment in reducing fire risks.

> **(CLIMATE)** We can all see that our climate is changing -- with hotter, drier conditions that contribute to more severe wildfires. Whatever the causes of changes in the climate, it's a reality we can't ignore. We need to take action now to prepare for the ways these changes in the climate

are affecting our forests -- and this plan is a critical way to keep people, property, and wildlife safe and our forests healthy in the years to come.

- **DO acknowledge the important ecological role of fire.** Highlighting the benefits of normal, healthy fire cycles can be helpful. Nearly two in five voters (37%) rated the "beneficial" message below as "very convincing" – a framing that was especially effective in the intermountain West, where this dynamic is well-understood and much more often discussed. The idea of "restoring balance" was also appealing to many in focus groups who believed that inaction had led us to forests that are "out-of-balance" today.

  **(BENEFICIAL)** We know that fire can be beneficial to the health of our forests. In fact, many types of plants and wildlife need fire to survive. Periodic fire stimulates plant growth, provides wildlife habitat, and ensures healthier natural areas near us. This plan is a step toward restoring the natural balance that fire brings to our forests.

- **DO stress the need for improved forest management to prepare for fire.** There is bipartisan agreement that the current approach to forest management isn't working – 64% called "lack of adequate forest management" the biggest or a major factor in fires (Figure 2). And a majority (55%) nationwide also believes that the overall condition of America's forests has worsened over the last few years. Stressing the need to do something different meets voters where they are: with the sense that something needs to change.

- **DO NOT ignore the need for more careful public behavior in and around fire-prone forests.** Many members of the public believe that a large share of wildland fires are started by humans, whether through a discarded cigarette or a campfire left unattended. (As shown in Figure 2, "careless behavior by people visiting forests" is seen as a "major factor" in more severe fires by as many voters as drought is.) Acknowledging that people need better education and clearer consequences for bad behavior around fire allows us to move on to the discussion of some of the most significant factors driving severe and out-of-control fires.

- **DO focus on the role of partnerships in acting to reduce fire risk.** Four out of five voters see "everyone" as bearing responsibility for reducing the risk of severe wildfire. More specifically, voters see every level of government, timber companies, and residents of fire-prone areas as bearing responsibility, along with conservation organizations and insurance companies (Figure 3). Native American Tribes rank lower on the list - despite voters' sense that they have relevant and effective cultural knowledge about fire and forest management - because voters do not understand that tribes own and manage large areas of forest. Overall, the idea that groups can and should partner to work to prevent fire and manage forests more effectively is highly appealing.

**Figure 3: Responsibility for Reducing Fire Risk**

*Here is a list of groups of people or organizations who might share some responsibility for reducing the risk of severe wildfires. Please tell me whether you think each one should have a great deal of responsibility, some responsibility, just a little responsibility, or no responsibility.*

| Group of People/Organization | Great/Some Responsibility |
|---|---|
| State government | 91% |
| Local government | 90% |
| Public landowners such as the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service | 88% |
| People who live in communities at risk of wildfire | 83% |
| The federal government | 83% |
| Everyone | 81% |
| Private landowners | 80% |
| Timber companies | 79% |
| Conservation organizations | 69% |
| Insurance companies | 60% |
| Native American Tribes | 37% |

- **DO use the term "controlled burn" in communicating with the general public.** While it may be considered less scientifically-accurate, the general public clearly prefers and better understands the term "controlled burn" in comparison to "prescribed fire."  Focus group participants fully recognized that use of the term "controlled" is not a guarantee of 100% effectiveness in controlling fire; rather, to them it simply implied that responsible and knowledgeable authorities were exerting every effort to ensure the safety of any fires that they set.  In contrast, many said the term "fire" was more scary than the term "burn," and many felt that the term "prescribed" – which they applied almost entirely to medication – was awkward and out of place in this context.

- **DO focus on the principle of preparation**. Voters intuitively understand and value saving money and lives by stopping unnecessary fires from happening and ensuring that ones that do occur are manageable and limited in their negative impacts. Contrasting the high financial and emotional cost of in the aftermath of a wildfire with the relatively low cost of intervention before the fact is highly persuasive.  While voters understand that

not every fire can or should be prevented, they like the idea of being proactive and working to avoid the worst of the potential consequences. Fully 53% of voters rated the "preparation" message below "very convincing" – the best response to any message tested by a significant margin. 44% of voters rated "less costly" as "very convincing" as well.

> **(PREPARATION)** When it comes to reducing wildfire risk, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Smart planning and preparation <u>before</u> a wildfire is a better investment than emergency response, firefighting, and clean-up afterward. Thinning one acre of dense forest costs $700 on average, whereas the cost of damaging wildfire is up to $2,150 per acre – for everything from clean-up to reduced tourism and higher insurance rates.

> **(LESS COSTLY)** More and more resources are needed for severe fires, leaving less money to reduce the risk of future fires. Yet thinning and controlled burns can be effective at removing fuel for fires to help reduce the risk of large, severe fires from spreading into areas where people live. For example, forests thinned and burned near Lake Tahoe were credited with slowing the advance of the massive Caldor Fire last summer. This plan invests in these proven strategies for reducing the risk of severe wildfires.

- **DO highlight the creation and support of a year-round workforce.** While wildfires are seasonal (with some increasingly more-frequent exceptions), voters intuitively understand the value of working on forest management throughout the year. To many, it makes sense to invest more evenly throughout the year, keeping workers stably-employed, fairly-paid, and connected to the land, than to hurriedly try to assemble a competent workforce as fires occur. To that end, 46% of voters rated the message below "very convincing," the second-highest of all messages tested.

> **(WORKFORCE)** Fire season has turned into a year-round challenge. We need to ensure that fighting fires and reducing the risk of fires is no longer an intermittent, low-paying job that comes at great personal risk. This plan will ensure that we have a year-round workforce constantly working to reduce the risk of severe wildfires.
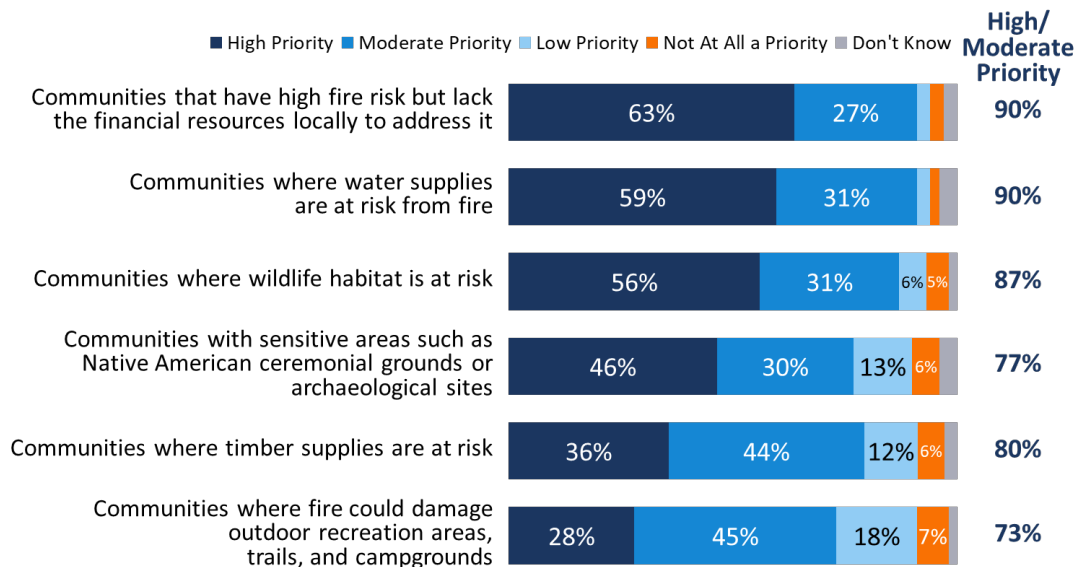
- **DO call out the need to protect and support first responders whose lives are at risk in addressing wildfires.** Voters are extremely sympathetic to firefighters and emergency responders and highlighting them in messaging builds support for investments in wildfire risk reduction. Reminding voters that reducing the intensity and severity of wildfires makes a tough job less dangerous and more manageable is critical. Two in five (41%) called the message below "very convincing."

> **(RESPONDERS)** Reducing the risk of severe fires helps protect our firefighters and emergency responders who save lives, homes, and communities. This plan is a critical step to protect the people who protect us.

- **DO NOT use language focused generally on equity in distributing funds, but instead explain the context.** Given careful wording, voters rank communities with high risk and few resources as a high priority for funding (Figure 4). However, less-contextualized references to promoting equity or directly funds to low-income communities sparked some resistance in focus groups – as some participants leapt to the assumption that fire risk would not be taken into account in the way funds would be allocated.

**Figure 4: Community Prioritization**

*It is likely that there will not be enough funding to support reduction of fire risk in every community across the United States. There are a variety of approaches that might be used to determine which communities should be the top priorities for receiving fire risk reduction funding. Please tell me how high a priority you think it should be direct funding to each of the following types of communities: a high priority, moderate priority, low priority, or not at all a priority.*



Legend: ■ High Priority ■ Moderate Priority ■ Low Priority ■ Not At All a Priority ■ Don't Know

| Community Type | High Priority | Moderate Priority | Low Priority | Not At All a Priority | High/Moderate Priority |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Communities that have high fire risk but lack the financial resources locally to address it | 63% | 27% | | | 90% |
| Communities where water supplies are at risk from fire | 59% | 31% | | | 90% |
| Communities where wildlife habitat is at risk | 56% | 31% | 6% | 5% | 87% |
| Communities with sensitive areas such as Native American ceremonial grounds or archaeological sites | 46% | 30% | 13% | 6% | 77% |
| Communities where timber supplies are at risk | 36% | 44% | 12% | 6% | 80% |
| Communities where fire could damage outdoor recreation areas, trails, and campgrounds | 28% | 45% | 18% | 7% | 73% |

- **DO NOT** focus on investing in protection of timber supplies or recreational areas. As shown above in Figure 4, voters are less-intensely concerned about timber supplies or outdoor recreation areas, as these are things they felt could be restored or recovered more easily if need be than water supply, habitat, or human communities.

- **DO NOT rely on the word "resilience" alone.** This research (and research in myriad other issue areas) has shown that voters do not readily connect this concept with the natural world or infrastructure; rather, they think it applies to people as individuals. Many also think of resilience as a quality displayed in recovery after a disaster has struck, rather than one that reflects an ability to avoid its worst harms. Preparation, safety and health are more appealing frames, because they leave open the possibility that a community could avoid the worst impacts of a disaster – rather than conceding that they will occur. Messaging should focus on concrete and desirable outcomes, such as "safe and healthy forests" or "fire-prepared communities."

- **DO NOT assume that people understand how fire threatens water supplies -- but DO convey the reality and seriousness of the risks.** Our research on land conservation messaging over the past few decades has shown that few rationales for action are as compelling as protecting water quality.  However, while people generally understand that healthy forests are critical to clean water supplies, the mechanisms by which fire puts water quality at risk are not especially clear. Once the process by which fires lead to contamination of survey water is briefly explained (as in the message below, which 41% rated as "very convincing"), voters find it compelling.

  > **(WATER)** When severe wildfires occur, ash and soil in burned areas can run-off into the sources of our drinking water. Almost 80% of clean water supplies in the West come from forested areas. By restoring the health of our forests and working to reduce the risk of severe fires, we can protect drinking water at the source and reduce the cost of filtering and cleaning water for millions of people.

- **DO stress provisions for public disclosure, audits, and fiscal accountability in any public spending proposal.** While the data show great confidence in specific public agencies tasked with land management (as discussed below), they also show high degrees of skepticism about "government" writ large.  In any discussion of significant federal investment in wildfire risk reduction in our research, that skepticism (and related fears of waste) emerged as the biggest obstacle to winning public support – far bigger than the absolute among of the investment in dollar terms.  Accordingly, it is important that any spending proposal be accompanied by explicit discussions of policies to ensure transparency and accountability in the way that funds will be spent.

- **DO use state and federal agencies with land management responsibility as messengers.** Voters especially trust the opinion of the US Forest Service (for some if only because "forest" is in the name), with 70% having a favorable view. They also have highly positive views of the National Park Service the Department of the Interior, and the USDA. Voters understand federal land managers as being guided by the mission of protecting the health of forests for current and future generations and wildlife, and largely trust information from these groups as being free of a profit motive or ideological agenda.
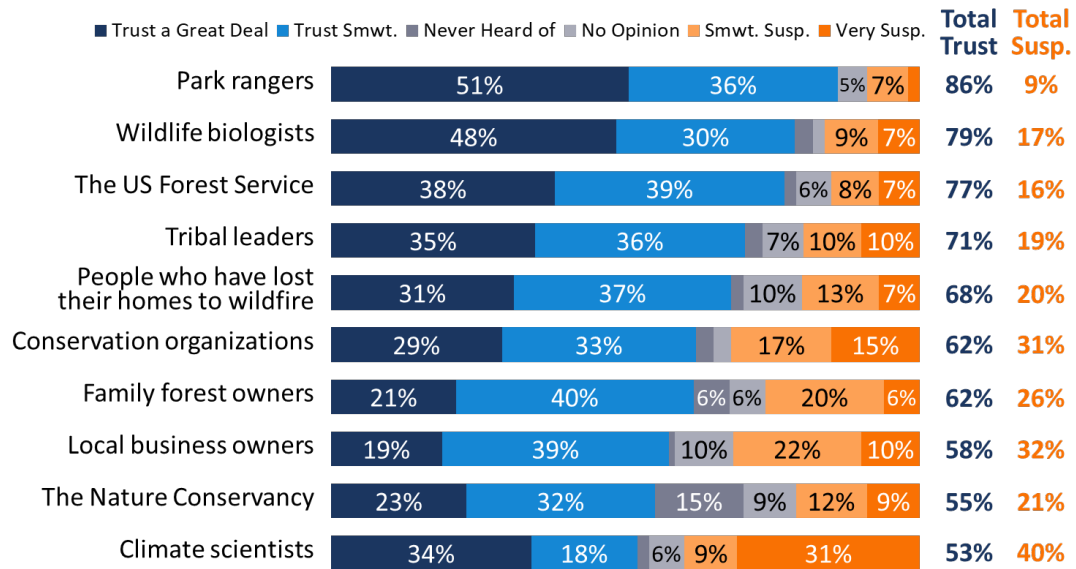
  The Bureau of Land Management is somewhat more divisive (39% view it favorably and 29% view it unfavorably), and less well-known than agencies like USFS or NPS.  Its name likely sounds more bureaucratic than those of many of its partner agencies, and less evocative of the value of the resources being protected.

- **DO also give wildland firefighters, park rangers, wildlife biologists and Tribal leaders prominent roles as messengers.** Figure 4 on the next page shows that voters trust messengers they see as neutral experts on fire issues, such as park rangers, wildlife biologists, and tribal leaders. They also value those with firsthand experience like people who have lost their homes to wildfires. Climate scientists are divisive along ideological lines and are best used for specific, climate-engaged audiences rather than the general public. Wildland firefighters were not tested as messengers in this poll, given that in every related research project firefighters are broadly trusted.

## Figure 5: Messenger Trust Ratings

*I will read a list of people and organizations that may take a position on the wildfire risk reduction proposal we've been discussing. Please tell me whether you would trust each person or organization's opinion on this proposal a great deal, trust them somewhat, be somewhat suspicious, or be very suspicious.*

Legend: ■ Trust a Great Deal ■ Trust Smwt. ■ Never Heard of ■ No Opinion ■ Smwt. Susp. ■ Very Susp.

| | Trust a Great Deal | Trust Smwt. | Never Heard of | No Opinion | Smwt. Susp. | Very Susp. | Total Trust | Total Susp. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Park rangers | 51% | 36% | | | 5% | 7% | **86%** | **9%** |
| Wildlife biologists | 48% | 30% | | | 9% | 7% | **79%** | **17%** |
| The US Forest Service | 38% | 39% | | 6% | 8% | 7% | **77%** | **16%** |
| Tribal leaders | 35% | 36% | 7% | | 10% | 10% | **71%** | **19%** |
| People who have lost their homes to wildfire | 31% | 37% | | 10% | 13% | 7% | **68%** | **20%** |
| Conservation organizations | 29% | 33% | | | 17% | 15% | **62%** | **31%** |
| Family forest owners | 21% | 40% | 6% | 6% | 20% | 6% | **62%** | **26%** |
| Local business owners | 19% | 39% | 10% | | 22% | 10% | **58%** | **32%** |
| The Nature Conservancy | 23% | 32% | 15% | 9% | 12% | 9% | **55%** | **21%** |
| Climate scientists | 34% | 18% | 6% | 9% | 31% | | **53%** | **40%** |