

# THE ROLE OF TRUST IN HOMEOWNER FIREWISE ACTIONS\*

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Consider this situation: A homeowner living in the fire-prone wildland–urban interface is told by a Forest Service community outreach representative that she should replace the windows in her house with double-paned tempered-glass windows to increase fire resistance. This renovation will likely cost thousands of dollars. However, the representative has presented a great deal of convincing data on the effectiveness of this step in reducing the risk that the home will be destroyed by fire.

How much does the homeowner trust the information presented? How much does she trust the competency of the agency involved? How does trust influence her decision to take the step or not?

These are the questions that James Absher and Jerry Vaske asked in a recent study published in the *International Journal of Wildland Fire* exploring linkages in measures of trust and specific Firewise actions taken by homeowners (Absher and others 2009). According to Absher, trust is always identified by Federal agencies as a critical component in working with communities and individuals on fire risk mitigation on their homes and properties, but

it is important to link the abstract concept of trust to specific actions and behavior on the ground.

“Trust is complex and the situations in which it acts are complex,” said Absher. “It is important to pull back and see which aspects of trust are important, and in what ways.”

Absher and Vaske conducted a mail survey of rural landowners in heavily forested counties along the Front Range of Colorado. They asked questions designed to measure respondents’ trust in (1) the information that the Forest Service provided regarding forest fires, and (2) the agency’s competency in responding to fires and conducting other land management activities (specifically, prescribed burns and thinning).

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**Trust in Forest Service information and competence was relatively high among the respondents.**

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Next, respondents were asked about (1) the perceived effectiveness of a set of Firewise actions, (2) previous Firewise actions they had taken, and (3) their intentions to complete Firewise actions in the future. The Firewise actions covered

steps designed to increase the fire resistance of the home (such as using fire-resistant building materials, cleaning roofs and gutters of ignitable material, and moving firewood and lumber away from the structure) and to protect their properties (such as planting fire-resistant species, moving plants away from the home, and increasing spacing between plants).

The survey yielded an interesting set of results. First, trust in Forest Service information and competence was relatively high among the respondents: between 82 percent and 87 percent trusted the information, and between 64 percent and 85 percent agreed that Government agencies competently handled fires and fuels projects. Second, respondents perceived the surveyed Firewise actions as effective in reducing fire risk, and most had taken at least a few of the steps and intended to take further actions.

However, Absher and Vaske went further and analyzed the relationship between the trust factors and past and intended actions. They found that the perceived effectiveness of actions predicted most of the recent Firewise actions and that past Firewise actions were the greatest predictor of future actions. As measured, trust factors had little observable influence on either past actions or intended actions.

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*\*The piece, published in spring 2011, is adapted from *Advances in Fire Practice*, a website maintained by the interagency Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center.*

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## Getting people to take minimal Firewise steps can lead to further, more significant actions in the long term.

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Absher said that the practical lesson to be drawn from this study is that efforts designed to get people to take at least the minimal Firewise steps can lead to further, more significant actions in the long term. He also said that the findings do not discount the value of trust in affecting homeowner decisions. Specific communities may have very different pathways to mitigating losses of homes to wildfires.

“This study shows that residents’ trust of agency recommendations is often strong,” said Absher. “If you don’t have trust, you may need to establish it before you can convince people of the effectiveness of some of these actions. But once you have it, you still have work to do in order to change behaviors.” ■

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## Reference

Absher, J.D.; Vaske, J.J.; Shelby, L.B. 2009. Residents’ responses to wildland fire programs: a review of cognitive and behavioral studies. Gen. Tech. Rep. PSW-GTR-223. Albany, CA: USDA Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Research Station. 31 p.

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