

## Efficient fire risk communication for resilient societies (eFIRECOM)

*Project co-funded by ECHO -Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection*

# Report on political recommendations to enhance journalists and media in wildfire risk management through communication actions

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June 2016

## Preface

The low social awareness regarding the exposure to fire risk combined with the reduced individual capacity to prevent and face emergencies increase both social vulnerability and the cost of civil protection actions.

**eFIRECOM** Project aims at enhancing the resilience of citizens to wildfires in interface areas from the Mediterranean region, through effectively promoting and increasing awareness and participation on the culture of risk with updated knowledge and best practices.

The two main results are:

- 1) Development of a communication toolkit for the capacity building of citizens and communities towards wildfire risk prevention, adapted to three target audiences: i) Communities and municipalities (inhabitants and managers of wildland urban interface), ii) Scholars, youths and their teachers, iii) Journalists and media professionals.
- 2) Edition and dissemination of operational and strategic recommendations for the improvement of the communication on risk and reduction of social vulnerability to wildfires in Mediterranean areas, transferred to the relevant authorities.

This report is included in the deliverables of action *5.2 Development of communication programmes and tools for and with journalists and media*, and wants to give operational recommendations for practitioners, risk managers, communicators and journalists to enhance the communication as a tool for wildfire risk management.

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**Project** ECHO 2014/PREV/13 Efficient fire risk communication for resilient societies (eFIRECOM)

**Co-financed by** Call for proposals 2014 for projects on Preparedness and Prevention projects in civil protection and marine pollution under the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism. Directorate-General Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection

**Website:** <http://efirecom.ctfc.cat/>

**Partnership:** Forest Sciences Centre of Catalonia - CTFC (Coord.), European Forest Institute Mediterranean Office - EFIMED, Fire Ecology and Management Foundation Pau Costa Alcubierre – PCF, EEIG FORESPIR, Direction Générale des Forêts de Tunisie and Université Hadj Lakhdar Batna

**Report Reference:** Plana, E., Serra, M., Font, M. 2016. Report on political recommendations to enhance journalists and media in wildfire risk management through communication actions. eFIRECOM Project (Deliverable 26), 12pp

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## Wildfires, a focus of public attention

Forest fires are one of the environmental impacts which society and media pay more attention over the world. And they are an increasing focus of public attention when the recurrent and virulent fires are not only burning forest land but suppose a hazard for people and infrastructures.

The Mediterranean landscape is composed by a strong intertwined of forest, rural areas and urban areas due to cultural and history reasons. In this context, the likelihood to get the society threatened by a forest fire is huge. This situation jointly with the spectacular of the enormous flames and the multiple emergency cases during a forest fires, catch all the focus of attention of media, even more during the summer season when other relevant news are vacancy.

Therefore, forest fires are a hot point in terms of attention and preoccupation. The success level perceived by policies of fire suppression and prevention, will be based on the total burnt area, while the eventual fatalities and injuries, the high value resources affected by fire and the wild land urban interface, will add an extra social and media relevance to the event.



**According to many authors, focusing only on the technological response of the fore fire, namely suppression resources could generate a false sense of safety. (Pictures: E. Plana)**

## Communication as a tool for social prevention, risk culture and emergency management

Media play a key role in the social risk prevention, risk culture and in the fire risk emergency management.

Media are large dissemination structures capable to reach a huge and heterogeneous audience, in terms of number of persons of different age. Because of this, media can be the main preferential channel when explaining to the general society the complex phenomenon of forest fires and its basics fundamentals, such as: the structural causes of forest fires related with the increase and over accumulation of forest fuel due to rural activities abandonment; the necessity of a responsible behavior of our society during the high risk periods, in order to minimize the human made ignition causes

(barbecues, sparks cigarettes...); or the need of protect our forest from the catastrophic mega fires. Thus media can develop an important pedagogic and didactic role to facilitate and promote the understanding of the forest fires problem, beyond the present sensationalist messages.

Without the pressure of informing about the emergency and in a longer journalist format (documentaries, thematic reports, interviews, etc.), developing in a more detailed and pedagogic way the issue is more possible, through developing concepts such as the ecological role of fire (good fire, namely prescribed burns, prevent “bad” fire; namely destructive forest fires) or explaining the benefits of rural development as an active fire prevention tool; namely use of wood for energetic purpose, mosaic landscape promotion or the sheepherding. All these topics are of relevance and interest of our society, and allow disseminating the different present tools and policies implemented to manage the fire risk, as well as inviting the citizenship to participate actively to the fire prevention dynamics by means of reaching a responsible behavior as a forest user or as a consumer of local products, giving value to the necessity of conserving the landscape.



**GOOD FIRES PROTECT YOUR FOREST**

**FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE**  
Fires set by lightning and other natural causes occur burned regularly in our forests. These fires cleared out undergrowth, preventing the buildup of overgrowth that can fuel large-scale wildfires. Today, prescribed fires mimic natural fire conditions to prevent dangerous fuel buildup.

**HELPING ANIMALS & PLANTS**  
The animals and plants in our forests need fire to keep their habitats healthy. Many species depend on good fires to thrive. Prescribed fires, carefully set by expert burn managers, help our woodland plants and animals by re-creating the fire patterns they depend on.

**HISTORY OF FIRE**  
As a developing nation, the United States had a landscape that was shaped by frequent fire. But as development spread and fire prevention grew, a lack of regular burning led to “fire famine” that hurt forest habitats and created wildfire conditions. That’s when land stewards began to recommend prescribed fire to restore the natural cycle of fire and rebirth.

**HOW PRESCRIBED FIRES WORK**

- Burn managers find a natural **break**, such as a creek, or create one with a tractor and harrow.
- A **backfire** is set downwind to create the **black line**, a burned area that will contain the prescribed fire.
- When weather conditions are favorable, **headfires** are carefully ignited upwind so they will burn to the **black line**.
- Crew members patrol throughout the prescribed burn to ensure the fire is contained.

Some example from USA of dissemination about the prescribed burning (<https://goodfires.org/>) and how even high intensity natural forest fires are included in the management of wilderness areas (Picture down left: E. Plana)

As the fires come out of the forest and interact with settlement and population in the so called wildland urban interface, media can address aspects related to citizens' self-protection capacity and how to act during an emergency (evacuation and containment protocols), and the need to collaborate with the

authorities as well. In front the present global emergency context, citizenship safety becomes the first priority. Thus, moving to a better prepared society, able to manage properly a fire emergency situation in a less vulnerable way, allows integrating the population, into the risk management, as a part of the solution instead of as a part of the problem. Increasing the individual and collective response capacity, enables minimize the social vulnerability and to improve the efficiency of the fire suppression tasks, which can focus mainly on the forest fires, avoiding the protection of homes and infrastructures.



During the Emergency, media are the mediatory platform to transmit information, from descriptive data of the fire (burnt surface, ignition cause, etc.) to operational recommendations (affected and potential risk areas status, safety recommendations to be adopted by the population at risk, etc.). The emergency management systems should adopt and develop official press offices to attend and respond to all the information necessities asked by media covering the event. The official information has to be enough truthfully and updated, and be delivered with promptness in order to contrast, in a specific moment, the huge amount of information available on the social networks. Other important issues aiming to improve the information process offered by the official press office are the periodic press releases during the emergency, giving detailed and updated information about the event, identifying the authorized interlocutors and offering the possibility to take real pictures of the ongoing fire with ensuring the safety of the emergency personnel and those of media.

## Information treatment of forest fires

Forest fires information treatment is strongly influenced by many factors such as the previous knowledge and back ground of the journalist in forest fire topics, the capacity of explaining complex issues through simple messages and in few time lapses, or the immediacy required during the emergency.

In one side, during the summer season, frequently the newsroom counts with complementary and temporary journalists without too much experience in covering environmental topics. This yearly journalists renewal oblige to treat the forest fires problem from the starting point consecutively, but beyond the sense of being a repetitive exercise, it has to be understood as completely necessary, in order to ensure a common and basic language between all the parts involved in the forest fire risk management.

In the other side, during the moment of dealing with the fire risk communication, would be necessary to keep in mind society, in general terms, isn't an expert on forest fires phenomenon (and the complexity of its structural problems), reason why almost all audience expects for a successfully and quickly response to the problem based on the suppression resources. Commonly there is confusion between the ignition cause (the action or motivation behind the start of the fire) and the forest fires cause (the landscape's capacity to supports and spreads a forest fires over the suppression capacity of our firefighter system); and even in the worst cases, last concept is replaced by first one. Another relevant issue is the importance given during the last decades on the negative face of fire, showing forest fires as a public enemy to fight against, without explaining as well its natural positive effects on the ecosystem, known as the ecological role of fire (historical natural forest fires caused by lightnings, affecting to a vegetation well adapted to the natural regime of the disturbance). Additionally to this, the negative social perception of forest trees cutting, difficult the dissemination and acceptance of sustainable forest management benefits as a major tool for fire prevention. Finally, would be necessary to account the climate change scenarios, which are modifying the present fire risk context, increasing it into non historically fire prone areas (for instance the alpine domain), where intense and severe fire are becoming more and more frequents within populations typically devoid of a fire risk culture.

The fire phenomenon complexity hasn't to be a motivation for confuse or a partially treatment of the information. Fires are somehow the top of the iceberg of a interconnected set of factors; from the globalization effects on the rural activities, to the effects of climate change and the fire risk periods increase, or the impact of urban planning policies that have generated the wildland urban interface problematic. Forest fire information can segment the different parts of the causal chain, but it is strongly recommended to don't neglect how they interact. As an example, when reducing homes's vulnerability in the wildland urban interface, we can act more efficiently in the fire's suppression, avoiding future new homes's threats, and reducing as well the citizenship and infrastructures's hazards. Promoting the forestry, agricultural and farming management at the landscape level, we are fostering a less large fire vulnerable landscape, and earning all the derived costs avoided.

Another important issue to be avoided during the forest fires information treatment is the political and media instrumentalization of the phenomenon (focusing all the attention on the intended miss coordination between the risk management actors - which in general all kind of emergency is perceived as a situation out of control – hindering the necessary post-emergency debate). The sensationalism treatment of the catastrophic events neither are recommended, because it can promote in one hand, arsonists behaviours (not from the pyromaniac point of view, but from the pleasure of seeing all the suppression resources deployment as a kind of spectacle), and in the other hand, delve into the technologic myth (strengthening the idea that all forest fires can be suppressed with water resources such as trucks, air tankers, helicopters and firefighters). This last situation leads to spread and consolidate a false sense of safety within the communities at risk, disregarding their duties and responsibilities of self protection measures implementation, and increasing the vulnerability of the population and infrastructures.

Finally, taking into account the diversity of actors related with the fire risk management, it is recommended to manage information and communication in a coordinated way between all them. Thus it will be reinforced the message credibility and trust, and will also strengthen the coordination of prevention, extinction and emergency management policies that may be in one or several management units of the administration, but should be perceived as unique for the citizenship. Communication partnerships with environmental organizations (NGO's) lead to build up a common message ensuring its credibility and a wide dissemination impact of it to the general public and sensitized one.

## The contribution of strategic communication in the field of forest fires

Facing the complexity of forest fires phenomenon, get some specific material for media would help them to prepare and build the news, to identify interlocutors, and to overcome some traditional fire myths. Two examples of this forest fire understanding specific material for media are found in Ingalsbee 2005 (USA) and Plana et Barrigón 2007 (Spain).

Other examples of specific communication tools based on expert criteria are found in many publications of WWF/Adena and Greepeace NGO's, which have created an interesting link communication between two think tanks.

Gschwandt (2008) highlights the reduced possibilities of communication's policies success when explaining complex phenomenon. Reason why results so important to establish a systematic and focused communication, based on well calibrated strategic approach. The basic elements for establishing the strategic approach are always the same and follow the usual cycle: status quo's analysis, objective definition, measures identification, implementation, evaluation and re-analysis, if necessary. A special attention is needed on the target audience identification, as well as in the message formulation, which has to be clear, understandable, credible and concise (the 4 C's rule), and adapted in content and format to the specific needs of each target audience.

As discussed above, promoting a risk culture able to deal with present challenges of emergencies requires of:

- Improve the social understanding of fire causal frame, making clearly the difference between the "ignition risk" and the binomial "fire spread capacity – fire suppression capacity".
- Explaining the natural role of fire as an intrinsic disturbance of our landscapes (get less vulnerable landscapes to mega fires).
- Boosting the understanding of landscape's fragility and vulnerability to increase the awareness level on the risk exposition, self-protection needs, individual responsibilities, etc.
- Explaining the fire risk management as an opportunity for rural areas development, acknowledging the role of agricultural and forestry activities on the forest fuel management, as well as its relation with the environmental services and landscape quality degree.

Forest fire risk communication adapted for each social context, should:

- Do make distinction between fire and forest fire.
- Do avoid the simplistic approach focused on the last link of the causal chain of mega fires.



- Do avoid fatalists and extreme's causalities approaches to justify a natural regime of disturbance.
- Do relativize the importance of technological response.
- Do de-emphasize the emergency management's spectacular.
- Do avoid the emergency's instrumentalization and do not promote sociopolitical debates already overcame at the expert level.

Under this conceptual frame, development of a communication's strategy about fire and forest fire risk management, would achieve 3 major objectives:

- Do promote a cultural change amongst society and fire risk related actors towards the role of fire in the ecosystem and the management of wildfire risk.
- Do improve the pedagogic extension of the journal treatment of wildfire phenomenon.
- Do improve the communication between all the stakeholders (information sources and partnerships)

This strategy should procure 2 main results:

- Do establish the common referential concepts about fire and forest fire risk management, as well as recommendations about communication and social prevention.
- Do create communication alliances with social actors, adapting the message to each target audience and dissemination channel type.

## Final remarks

- ✓ Social interest on forest fires represents a great opportunity to involve media in improving social phenomenon understanding and the fire risk management.
- ✓ As forest fires interact increasingly with society, it becomes urgent to tackle risk communication in order to integrate society as a part of the solution rather than part of the problem.
- ✓ It is recommended to integrated communication within the risk management strategies, as another tool to improve social prevention and increase the fire suppression efficiency in case of emergency.
- ✓ A forest fire risk strategic communication allows to deal with the phenomenon's complexity, and to expose the relations between hazard, vulnerability and response capacity in order to valorize in a pedagogical, informative and jointly way, the results of the prevention, suppression and global emergency management policies.
- ✓ To highlight the necessity of reach less vulnerable landscapes to high intensity fire spread allows to make visible in an attractive way, the benefits of agricultural and forestry management, and at the same time, to actively involve society in the risk mitigation dynamic (consumption of local productions, responsible behavior, valorization and conservation of environmental services, etc.).
- ✓ In front the increasing social demand on forest leisure, forest fire prevention could represent an opportunity for rural areas development, with fully justified social, ecological and economic arguments.

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