Planning a Wildland-Urban Interface Communication Program[1]

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Communication and outreach programs are essential for helping residents of the wildland-urban interface understand natural resource issues and take appropriate actions. They are also helpful tools to create a positive image for your agency or organization, to learn about the concerns and questions residents have, and to work collaboratively to help resolve interface issues.

Successful communication and outreach programs require planning and organization. While a variety of guidelines exist for planning a communications effort, the widely used version described below is based on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Outreach Strategy (USFWS 1997). Additional information in other EDIS fact sheets may be helpful to review various wildland-urban interface issues, management in the interface, land-use planning processes, wildland fire, and communication strategies.

Step 1: Assessment—It is important to be clear about the purpose of the communication. Assemble partners and discuss the problem and the opportunities to communicate. Think carefully about your vision for the future of this issue and your role in promoting it. Should you communicate with residents or with other resource agencies? Should you target community leaders or groups that can help educate others, like landscape architects, builders, or teachers? Is this an urgent issue that requires immediate resolution? Is there a conflict brewing? Who might disagree with your proposed solution, and what role should they have in your plan?

Programs can change and grow over time. The Bayscapes program on the Chesapeake Bay was originally designed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to reduce nonpoint source water pollution by assisting homeowners with landscaping ideas. It generated enough positive energy in the pilot community that the homeowners' association took over. They developed short- and long-term goals for their efforts and identified target areas for habitat restoration based on GIS maps and a community plan. They produce a newsletter, set up displays, and hold annual native-plant sales.

Step 2: Audience—Determine your audiences and learn about them. First list the groups and audiences that you may wish to reach with your program; determine how much you already know about their concerns, expectations, perceptions, and attitudes; and develop a strategy to learn what you do not yet know using data collection tools. Also identify the strategies you can use to contact these audiences—conferences, existing group meetings, media, trade organizations, etc. Collect information about your audiences and use that to develop your program objectives and messages.

Step 3: Develop a goal and objectives—Your work with the audiences may help reframe the purpose of your program. Instead of making people aware only of the origins of nonpoint source water pollution, for example, you may also provide information about septic tank upkeep. The goal, to enhance water quality, remains the same. With your purpose or goal in place, you next develop specific objectives of what you want your audience to be able to know and do as a result of your program. Some people find it helpful to develop objectives by completing the sentence, "By the end of this program, participants should be able to. . . ." The more specific your objectives, the better they will be at guiding the development of your program. Use your stakeholders and partners to make sure these objectives meet their needs, too.

Step 4: Message and tools—Referring to the objectives, develop themes or messages for the program. If the program is a presentation, your messages will be the three main points you cover in the body of the talk. If the program is a campaign that includes press releases, brochures, and presentations, you may stagger the messages so that the first one builds awareness and a later one builds skills to solve the problem. If you know the audiences, you can match the messages to the tools you use to reach them. A brochure may be handy, but there may be other strategies that also work. Think broadly about the tools that can be used to reach your audiences. Pilot test the messages and tools with members of the audience to make sure your tools will be effective.

When developing the outreach materials, use guidelines to create the best product (Jacobson, McDuff, and Monroe 2015). Effective program development (NAAEE 2022) and

brochure design can help make the difference between a ho-hum program and a whiz-bang success (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Producing the Wildland Fire Education Toolkit involved an assessment with fire and forestry experts, a needs assessment with interface residents, expert review of the materials, and a training workshop to ensure that a high quality program was produced.
Credit: M. Monroe, UF/IFAS

Step 5: Plan—There may be specific dates (e.g., the opening of hunting season or a county commission vote) that drive the schedule for your program. Creating a timeline of what needs to be done, in what order, and by whom will help program organizers coordinate the communication program. This step will also help identify needed resources (funds, volunteers, materials).

Step 6: Implementation—It is time to roll the presses and authorize the purchase orders! Use your partners to deliver the messages to the audiences. Think about which audiences or messages should come first. Provide training for field managers or volunteers who will be involved in delivering the program. Develop a monitoring process so that you will be able to track success.

Step 7: Monitor and improve—Collect information so that you can answer the question: Did it work? That question has two different types of answers: was the plan implemented as we hoped (did the activities occur, were the billboards put up); and did the activities achieve what we hoped (did people learn, are they satisfied, do they intend to act). It is helpful to track both types of answers. If several strategies are implemented concurrently, however, it may be difficult to discover whether the roadside kiosk, the radio broadcast, or the article in the newspaper was worth the time and effort to create it. Instead, focus on evaluating the overall program, not each tool.

Summary

Although it may be easiest to begin a conservation program by writing a press release or designing a poster, these should not be the first steps to communicate a wildland-urban interface issue. Instead, the first steps in designing outreach programs should be assessing the situation, building the partnership, and understanding the audience. That information will help Extension agents and resource professionals target the appropriate audience with messages and tools that will save time, save money, and be more effective.

References

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