



## The Importance of Good Communication: Learning from Previous Experience

In the summer of 2015, the eastern Sierras of California were affected by thick smoke from the Rough Fire. The fire, which was naturally caused, spread rapidly, burning approximately 3,000 acres per day throughout all of August and much of September. The fire put the lives and homes of people living nearby at risk, and many had to evacuate the area. The intensity of the fire and steepness of the terrain made it difficult and dangerous for firefighters to stop the fire. For seven weeks, air and fire specialists, public health officials, and community leaders worked to protect the people and stop the fire. But after the fire was extinguished, controversy flared up.

Trent Procter is the Forest Service Air Quality Program Manager for region 5 who works to improve communication during fire events. “We are meeting with public health officials and community leaders to explain why we couldn’t stop the fire any sooner.” Procter mentioned that multiple agencies worked seamlessly together to put out the fire as quickly and safely as possible, but the public did not understand that. “The Forest Service provided monitoring information, training, and guidance to the communities, but many people either didn’t know about it or didn’t understand the information.”



Figure 1 - firefighter in Rough Fire holding a shovel in his left hand and a dry torch in his right hand.



Figure 2 - Fire throughout the Forest of Eastern Sierra, California.

The local people seem to have come to the same conclusion. As stated in an article from *Mammoth Times*, although “fire information on the Incident website has been very informative, some of the basic terminology was misinterpreted by the public.” This situation has caused great concern both among some publics, who perceived the agencies response as inadequate, and also among the agencies that provided the information to protect public health and safety.

“Understanding the importance of good communication not only between the agencies and specialists who work to put out fires but also with the communities being affected is very important and a priority,” Procter mentioned.

“We already have good relationships with regulatory and public health agencies. Now, we need to build that same strong relationship with communities.” Procter emphasises that air specialists need to do more outreach outside the fire season, when fire fighting demands are lower and there is more time to educate and communicate with the public. “We need to explain to people what we are doing and what they can do to get information and protect themselves before the smoke arrives.” Procter, along with the air specialists, hopes the controversy will be resolved soon. He is already making plans to improve communications and relationships with communities to avoid a similar misunderstanding in the future.



Figure 3 – Trent Procter, a Forest Service air quality specialist talking to other specialists in the forest.