
SECTION II

Fireside Chats: Getting Beyond Official Sources for Information and Interviews

Surprisingly, reporters are more tightly controlled in covering domestic wildfire incidents than they are on foreign military combat operations. In the war against Iraq, for example, the U.S. military allows “embedded reporters” to accompany troops on the front lines of battle, but very few similar opportunities are offered to reporters to visit firelines and observe firefighting crews. If reporters get to the fireline at all, it is usually in the form of press pools for brief tours escorted by agency fire information officers under carefully prescribed conditions.

The agencies claim they have nothing to hide, and official escorts are for a reporter’s own good. But an official media handbook warns agency employees about photographers and reporters:

“They should never be allowed out of the fire camp unescorted. It is too easy for them to get lost and/or hurt wandering around a fire by themselves. They might also see some control activities that they don’t understand, like a backfire being set, and get the wrong impression: ‘Fire fighters start a massive forest fire.’” [source: National Wildfire Coordinating Group. 1982. Fire Information Officer’s Guide. PMS 411-1, NFES 0383. Pg.13].

Consequently, reporters are mostly contained and controlled within the safe confines of fire camps, where they are almost exclusively dependent upon official government spokespersons to inform them of firefighting operations and events.

In March 2004, federal agencies developed new guidelines to provide better media access to wildland fires, including escorted visits to firelines. Although the guidelines state that denials should be rare, press access to firelines is still considered a privilege, not a right, which requires the approval of fire incident commanders. The vast majority of sources interviewed for fire stories are thus Forest Service incident commanders, public affairs officers or fire information officers. Most of these employees are dedicated, hard-working professionals, but they are also trained and instructed to weave agency-directed “management messages” into the information they present to reporters as “the facts.” [source: National Wildfire Coordinating Group. 1982. Fire Information Officer’s Guide. PMS 411-1/NFES 0383. USDA/USDI/NASF. pg.1]

The few exceptions to these official voices are the occasional interviews with local residents, usually discussing such things as their fears of the fire, steps they are taking to prepare for evacuation or protect their property and their admiration and gratitude for the firefighters. **The rarest voice of all interviewed in wildfire stories are ground-level firefighters speaking directly from the firelines.** It is incumbent upon journalists to expand the range of their information and interview sources used to report fire news. Below are some alternative sources that FUSEE urges reporters to interview.

Wildland Firefighters

The first new sources to seek are ground-level wildland firefighters. Their voices will certainly add color to stories, but more importantly, may reveal another valuable “grounded” perspective of fire issues, different than that provided by official spokespersons. See Section IV of this *Guide* for some suggested questions about suppression operations to ask firefighters in the field. Reporters would do

Big fires can also become *tourist attractions* in themselves, as was discovered following the Yellowstone Fires of 1988. While news media had reported that the nation’s premier national park had been “destroyed” by wildfire, the rich displays of wildflowers and bison flourishing in some of the most severely burned areas of the park debunked this image. Tourists continued to come to the park to the delight of local tourist-dependent businesses. Such “enlightened” business owners who can acknowledge the economic opportunities resulting from wildfires are worthy voices to interview, helping to balance the predictable “doom and gloom” voices. So are the tourists who intentionally or accidentally visit burned forests.

Conservation Volunteers and Timber Workers

Finally, reporters will occasionally interview paid staff and official representatives of forest conservation organizations and logging companies. Often, specific wildfire events become proxies for ongoing public debates over federal land management policies. The fire issue often becomes reduced to a debate over commercial logging, as happens to most journalistic accounts of controversial forest management issues.

Reporters gather plenty of “spin” from professional agency staff and public relations firms, but media have largely failed to investigate the attitudes and beliefs held by conservationist volunteers, timber workers and ordinary citizens about a whole array of fire-related issues. Timber workers and conservation volunteers—distinct from business executives and professional staff—are still mainly an untapped source of information and interview material. One of the biggest stories yet to be fully told is the growing support among conservationists and timber workers for ecologically-based small-diameter understory tree thinning—qualitatively distinct from large-diameter overstory logging—as a means of reducing wildfire hazards and preparing sites for prescribed burning while generating jobs for local communities and woodworkers.



well to offer anonymity to ground-level firefighters, too, since they face potential retaliation on the job for speaking critically about government operations.

Reporters need to demand interview access to fire crews, and should insist on the ***right to observe firefighters in action on the firelines***, not just in fire camp. Observing and interviewing firefighters on the fireline will expose journalists to some of the safety risks, health hazards, misery, fear and boredom, as well as excitement and adventure, that makes up the lot of wildland firefighters. These experiences may prompt new angles and critical perspectives than the typical glorified firefighting story written from the safe confines of fire camp.

Fire Scientists and Fire Ecologists

Other sources to interview in order to gain greater context for reporting fires include various fire experts such as scientists and ecologists. These people can help explain the broader context for wildland fire events. Examples include: The natural ecological role of fire, the specific fire history or fire regime of a given place, the expected biological and physical effects of the fire, the influence of past management activities on fire behavior and fire effects.

Interviewing fire scientists and fire ecologists provides balance to the perspective of fire managers, and adds a valuable educational component to the news. The outcome might be to help **make fires seem less “alien”** and more understandable to people, thereby diminishing some of the fear and hatred of fires that results from patented sensationalistic wildfire accounts that fail to provide any scientific, ecological or historical context for these events.

Local Homeowners and Community Members

When interviewing in rural areas, remember: No two homeowners are alike. Those who have taken proactive steps to prepare their homes for living in a fire environment using “FIREWISE” principles might offer a completely different perspective than those homeowners who have done little or nothing to prepare their properties. Reporters might even be surprised to discover that there are some people who refuse to leave their homes when authorities give evacuation orders, and instead, choose to “**shelter in place**” and stay to protect their homes. These people are more often isolated homeowners living in the rural/wildland “intermix” (as opposed to the urban/wildland “interface”) who do not always show up at town meetings convened by fire officials. Reporters may have to go out into the hinterland and seek them out.

Small Business Owners

Other voices from rural America that offer valuable perspectives are small business owners. Typically, news media report wildfires as causing economic disasters in rural communities either through the “destruction” of natural resources or the disruption of tourist activities. However, many merchants and other **local businesses can make windfall profits while wildfires are burning** by providing goods and services to firefighters. Additionally, some tourist-related businesses may have their incomes temporarily suspended while a fire is burning, but the beneficial ecological effects of fire may more than compensate them for their losses. This is especially true for hunting and fishing guides, for example, when fires help produce excellent foraging habitat for big game and superior spawning habitat for wild fish. Fires can also create new commercial opportunities for harvesting wild mushrooms and berries in burned areas.