



GORDON AND BETTY
MOORE
FOUNDATION

Wildfire Resilience Media Response Guide

How to prepare for media interviews during times of disaster



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Cover Photos (Left to Right): GBMF MS-IR and FLIR LW-IR cameras looking at fire from 10,000 ft. Credit: Tim Ball
CXL participating in a cultural burn with the North Fork Mono Tribe, Mariposa, CA, Feb 2024. Credit: M. Adeney
Hart Prairie Preserve, Arizona, Credit: Neil Chapman, TNC



TREX training prescribed burn at UC Santa Barbara Sedgwick Reserve. Credit: Jeff Rumans, BurnBot

Overview

We are pleased to provide this media response guide to equip partners within the wildfire community with a go-to resource during extreme wildfire events. As experts in your community, you are natural media spokespeople, but we know that in times of crisis, it's helpful to have an easy-to-use resource that allows you to quickly prepare and respond to media inquiries. This guide is intended for those who have the responsibility to communicate publicly on behalf of your organization in anticipation of, during, or after an extreme wildfire event.

We expect that most media inquiries will focus on disaster framing. Our hope is to provide you with tips and tools that allow you to shift conversations from near-term, reactive disaster framing toward actions that build and support year-round and sustained wildfire resilience activities in your community.

The resource is designed to help you quickly prepare for a media interview and decide what to say, when to say it, and how to say it when media inquiries arise. We provide guidance on what to expect from reporters and tips to pivot from crisis coverage to resilience solutions.



Scenario-based preparation

The guide includes two disaster-related scenarios:

- 1. Catastrophic wildfire affecting your community**
- 2. Catastrophic wildfire outside your community**

As you receive inquiries from the media (or community leaders), identify the scenario that best matches the conditions and take a few moments to review that section as you prepare your response.

We expect you will need to refine the messaging for your community, tailoring to your geography, the situation's particular dynamics, and your intended audience.

Start here: Preparation is key

Here are three steps to help you prepare for any media interview:



Dillingham, Alaska, during a Basic Wildland Fire and Chainsaw training for Bristol Bay residents, October 2024. Credit: Misty Nielsen

- 1 Identify three to four key messages you want to convey based on the conditions you are experiencing.** This should include specific examples of successful or promising upstream solutions you want to champion.

Be sure you are clear what you want the reporter and, by extension, your audience to understand.

- 2 Prepare talking points that will help you convey those messages.** As you develop your talking points, keep these tips in mind:

Use accessible language. Use plain language and avoid jargon, acronyms (e.g., WUI), abbreviations, or unexplained terms (e.g., defensible space) that may confuse your audiences. Most audiences will have a mix of experts and laypeople; both must understand your language, so tailor it to laypeople. Keep it simple, clear, and transparent so people understand why action is critical and what they need to do.

Balance messaging about risk reduction with the benefits. Position fire mitigation as an added benefit to what communities already care about, such as nature, affordable housing, insurance, businesses, community, aesthetics, or safety. Tap into what resonates with your audience, and help shape fire mitigation as one more way to protect what they value in the community.

Convey that community members have responsibilities. Community members may feel that firefighters are the only ones with power to address fire. Remind audiences that there are concrete solutions to help lower fire risk and benefit local ecosystems. Talk about examples like landscape improvements and support for controlled burns, and specify how your audience can turn these solutions into reality.

Underscore the need for specific resilience plans and a suite of solutions that prioritizes what's most impactful. While solutions and plans will vary by jurisdiction, communicating the importance of a suite of upstream solutions will convey the need for a comprehensive approach before, above, and beyond suppression efforts.

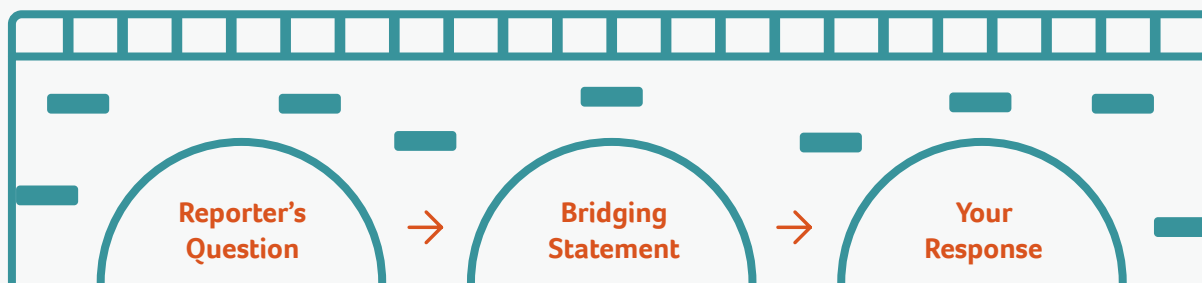
Showcase stories of effectiveness. Stories of successful efforts (past or present) will help audiences understand the benefits of mitigation efforts. Rather than critiquing communities or blaming policies, focus on what is working or shows promise. Highlight examples where successful solutions mitigated catastrophic fires or created measurable improvements to the environment, community, or other areas of interest to your audiences.

Frame costs as investments. When cost concerns arise, frame solutions as an investment rather than an expense. What people invest up front will be less than the back-end cost if a fire occurs and they're not prepared. People do not need a 100% guarantee that they will save money, but they want to be assured that the investment is worth it to decrease risk.

In the scenarios that follow, we've provided some draft talking points to get you started and help you think through what you might want to emphasize in the interview.

- 3 Be ready to pivot.** During a wildfire event, reporters will want to focus on the disaster or near-term recovery. If you happen to get a tricky question, you do not need to follow the reporter's lead. Use a "bridging phrase" to effectively transition to delivering the message you want to convey and talking points you've prepared.

If you get a tough question, use bridging phrases to pivot back to your key messages.



Bridging phrases can include:

- “That’s a fair question, but the bigger opportunity is ...”
- “What I can share with you is ...”
- “I can’t speculate on that, but I can tell you ...”
- “Let me put that in perspective ...”
- “It’s too early to talk about that, but we do know that ...”
- “That’s something I will look into, but what we are concerned with now is ...”

You can also use flagging statements to ensure your point is heard. It helps to keep your key points top of mind so that everyone in the conversation is on the same page and there is less room for interpretation or overthinking.

Flagging statements sound like:

- “Basically, what it boils down to is ...”
- “The most important thing to remember is ...”
- “After all ...”
- “What we need to remember is this ...”
- “Here’s where we stand ...”
- “The main point is ...”

Putting the pieces together: Sample narrative structure

Once you’ve thought through your key messages, drafted talking points, and thought about your pivot, you can shape a narrative that will guide your conversation with the reporter. Think about these four elements:

1. **Acknowledge shared values** — Open with an expression of your shared values with the community. This is an opportunity to connect with what is top of mind for them during the disaster.
2. **Pivot** — Shift from a focus on the current disaster to the importance of upstream solutions.
3. **Highlight local examples** — Make those solutions tangible. Identify effective and promising programs in your community that will give people a sense of what’s possible.
4. **Conclusion** — Reconnect to shared values, and reinforce hope and opportunity.

While this is not a script, being clear on these four elements will help prepare you to direct the interview back to your core message. In each scenario, we’ve provided a sample narrative to give you a sense of how you can piece a narrative together in different circumstances.

Language to embrace and replace

In shaping your talking points, keep these reminders in mind. These words and phrases will resonate with your audiences and more accurately reflect wildfires and mitigation efforts.

✓ Embrace	✗ Replace	Why
✓ Burned through, affected, impacted	✗ Inferno, incinerated, scorched, destroyed, erased the earth	These words are less inflammatory and more accurate, given that landscapes regenerate.
✓ Residents, community	✗ Homeowners	These words are more inclusive of people who will benefit, and they bring everyone into the efforts.
✓ Types of fires and intensity levels	✗ Catastrophic wildfire (when it isn't)	Not all wildfire is catastrophic.
✓ Controlled burn, beneficial fire, managed fire, pile burning	✗ Prescribed fire, cultural burns	People are more receptive to fires that are planned and managed; and beneficial fire is less likely to trigger wildfire survivors. In contexts like Alaska, “pile burning” resonates more than “prescribed fire.”
✓ Fire-resilient, fire-smart, fire adapted, fire-ready, fire- or ember-resistant Reduce, mitigate	✗ Fireproof, firesafe Prevent	People are more receptive to fires that are planned and managed; and beneficial fire is less likely to trigger wildfire survivors. In contexts like Alaska, “pile burning” resonates more than “prescribed fire.”
✓ Drought, extreme weather, less rain, increasing heat	✗ Climate change	“Climate” and “climate change” are politically charged words. Be specific about the conditions you mean.

SCENARIO 1

Catastrophic wildfire affecting your community



Rain Industries performs a demo of an autonomous Black Hawk equipped with Rain's software prepositioned seven miles away. Credit: Maxwell Brodie

Your community is dealing with a large, fast-moving wildfire in the wildland-urban interface. This fire poses a threat to community lives, health (e.g., air quality), daily routines (road closures), ecosystem service provisioning (e.g., drinking water, recreation, food production, and delivery), and property (homes, businesses, public institutions).

Media inquiries may come from local, regional, as well as national outlets that consider you a trusted expert who can provide context during a crisis.

Whether the fire is the result of human causes (e.g., arson, negligence) or natural causes (lightning, wind),

the community will be hyper-focused on evacuation and displacement, emergency response, and suppression. Your audiences may feel powerless.

The cause of the blaze may also create assumptions in your audience's mind. In the case of human causes, people will look for someone to blame. In the case of natural causes, people may assume that nothing can be done.

The framing below recognizes these barriers and seeks to help you overcome the bias of the reporter and community.

What tone should I use?

- Lead with empathy and seriousness. Avoid sensationalism.

What's top of mind for reporters?

- Evacuation orders vs. warnings
- Smoke and air quality: *Air Quality Index*, *asthma risk*
- Public safety power shutoffs
- Utility infrastructure and ignition speculation
- "Is this the new normal?" framing
- Impact on insurance coverage
- Water supplies and impacts

How can I pivot?

What is top of mind for the reporter need not be where you focus. For example:

- If they ask who's to blame for the fire, you can respond with something like: "While I can't speculate on what caused the fire, I can confirm that our first responders need our support to help fight this fire."
- If they ask how the public utilities should be responding, you can say something like: "That's a fair question, but I think the bigger priority right now is ensuring our neighbors and communities are safe."
- If they ask whether the fire will make it hard to obtain insurance going forward, you can respond with something like: "That's something I'll look into, but what we're most concerned with right now is heeding the warnings of our local first responders who are working hard to protect our properties and natural lands."

Ideas for scenario-based messaging

These sample talking points may fit your situation well or may inspire alternate ideas.

General	We are not defenseless against fire, no matter the ignition source, if we plan ahead to ensure our communities and landscapes are fire-ready. Every step we take reduces the chance of harm to our communities. Mitigation efforts — such as developing actionable resilience plans; removing plants and debris from around buildings to help firefighters defend our homes; and practices that clear dense vegetation and other fire hazards — help lessen the effects of catastrophic fires before they begin. Deploying a comprehensive suite of fire mitigation solutions is the best way to reduce risk and increase our communities' ability to adapt and shape a wildfire-resilient future.
Human cause	It's important that our focus doesn't lie in blaming a singular entity but instead lies in uniting to ensure people's health and safety while laying the groundwork for building a more resilient community. As we move forward toward recovery and rebuilding, we should think about how we better prepare our community to be safe and secure against future fires. We don't have to wait for fires to occur. We can protect our community by taking action now to keep our neighborhoods safe and secure.
Natural cause	Lightning hitting a tree and starting a fire or heatwaves creating tinderbox conditions among vegetation may be an unavoidable reality of the world we live in, but we can defend our neighborhoods and our communities against the fire's impact. Preventive measures, such as reducing the amount of combustible material with controlled burns, can reduce the intensity of fires started by lightning or other natural sources.

Tough questions

These are the types of questions reporters might raise during an interview. For many of these questions, you'll want to lean on your bridging skills to reframe the question and focus on your message. Have your pivot phrases handy!

- What can we learn from this?
- Suppression is what puts fires out once they've started. Why shouldn't we invest more in that over prevention?
- Fires like this seem to be the new normal. What can we do about them?
- What efforts can prevent this from happening here?
- What lessons can we learn from this fire and apply to our own community?

SCENARIO 2

Major wildfire outside your community



A major wildfire is in the news. It is not directly affecting your local community, but it is garnering regional or national attention. It may be happening in an area where property is affected, or it could be occurring in wildlands where people and property are safe, but the intensity of the fire is causing it to spread rapidly.

Though your community is not directly affected, this is an opportunity to talk about work underway to mitigate disasters in your area. Depending on the circumstances, it may also provide an opportunity to talk about beneficial fire. Attention to the disaster provides an opportunity for you to talk about your work and encourage investment in strategies that will make your community safer and more resilient.

This fire could be human-caused or naturally occurring. Either way, in these situations, your audiences may be both frightened and angry. Reporters may reference other fires from similar conditions. It's important to acknowledge what happened and avoid a blame game. There is a delicate balance in communicating about the current disaster and reinforcing the value of beneficial fire.

Media inquiries may come from local, regional, or national sources that consider you a trusted expert who can provide context on the fire or the best methods for combatting it.

What tone should I use?

Informative, practical, assuring, empowering

What's top of mind for reporters?

- The cause and spread of the fire
- How to prevent the fire elsewhere
- Suppression efforts
- Smoke impacts and air quality: *Air Quality Index, asthma risk*
- Ecosystem impacts: *e.g., loss of redwoods, wildlife*
- What fire service leaders are doing to preserve beloved land
- Fire risk in your community
- Insurance cancellations

How can I pivot?

What is top of mind for the reporter need not be where you focus. For example:

- If they ask you why more homes aren't being saved, you can say something like: "While I can't speculate on that, we know there are practical things people can do to make their homes easier to defend during times of disaster."
- If they refer to reports that people are losing their insurance and try to get you to criticize the industry, you can say something like: "It's too early to talk about that. What I do know is that we are getting smarter about community risk levels and what we can do to make properties more fire resilient."
- If they suggest that suppression efforts should be more aggressive, you can say something like: "Let me put that into perspective. At this time, the fire is not endangering lives or property, and with the current conditions, this type of fire can be beneficial to the landscape, potentially preventing future catastrophic fires."

Ideas for scenario-based messaging

These sample talking points may fit your situation well or may inspire alternate ideas.

Urban/suburban fire outside your community	Mitigation efforts such as removing plants and debris from around buildings are important to create defensible space and help firefighters defend our homes. We hope that these mitigation efforts will become the norm in our communities moving forward.
Rural/wildland fire outside your community	In our community, we are working to avoid these types of extreme fires in the future by implementing controlled burns, selective thinning, and other stewardship activities to ensure our homes and landscapes are ready for fire. We do this by clearing dense vegetation and other fire hazards, reducing the types of fuels that feed these catastrophic fires.
Fire threatening/ affecting a national park or other beloved location	[Location Name] is loved by many people and important to the local economy. First responders are doing their best to contain the fire and stop it from spreading to this important area.
Result of controlled burn escaping	We understand that this began as a controlled burn that unfortunately was pushed out of control. Local experts do their best to keep controlled burns within the confines of the control area but occasionally encounter circumstances beyond their control that cause a fire to burn too far or too fast. What we should focus on now is supporting our first responders to address the fire and keep our communities and ecosystems safe.
Result of managed burn escaping	This fire was being closely monitored as a managed burn, with the intent of using beneficial fire to clear a land area and improve the ecosystem. Unfortunately, a combination of unexpected weather conditions caused the fire to burn out of control. Our focus now is on supporting first responders to address and contain the fire and keep our communities and ecosystems safe.
Human caused	It's important that our focus doesn't lie in blaming a singular entity for this fire but instead lies on uniting and providing support to our neighbors to ensure people's health and safety while laying the groundwork for building a more resilient community.

Tough questions

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- Suppression is what puts fires out once they've started. Why shouldn't we invest more in that over prevention?
- Fires like this seem to be the new normal. What can we do about them?
- What efforts can prevent this from happening here?
- What lessons can we learn from this fire and apply to our own community?



Aspiring fire lighters learning how to operate a "slip on engine" from Elizabeth Azzuz, Cultural Fire Management Council. Credit: Margo Robbins

Supplementary materials

Consider tone and timing during disasters

When disaster strikes, there is a key window of time to engage audiences while wildfire is top of mind before people move on. However, engaging directly impacted audiences too early about upstream solutions will not be effective and may even be insensitive when they are focused on evacuation and relief. Effective engagement in the wake of a fire requires being attuned to priority audiences' readiness for discussing upstream solutions while not losing the moment.

Be sensitive and read the room

Acknowledging what your audience is feeling will demonstrate empathy. As conditions change, evaluate how to moderate your talking points:

- Are priority audience members (such as community members or policymakers) overwhelmed, grieving, or angry?
- Are audience members physically safe and able to think beyond immediate survival?
- Are audience members looking for hope, expressing relief and gratitude, and asking what's next?

Solutions in your region

When introducing upstream solutions, highlight projects that will be most impactful for your region and that align with your community's resources, needs, and abilities. Describe how your community is prioritizing infrastructure solutions, supporting beneficial fire, and testing technological solutions.



Community-based solutions

Describe work underway to decrease communities' fire disaster risk. These solutions will mitigate property loss and disrupt fire pathways and structure-to-structure conflagration in developed wildland-urban interface communities.



Ecosystem-based solutions

Describe stewardship work underway to reduce ecosystem vulnerability. These solutions will increase beneficial fire (annual acres burned at low-to-moderate intensity) and could reduce detrimental fire (annual acres burned at high severity).



Technology-based solutions

Help the community understand how innovation and technology are making preparation and firefighting more effective. Describe how your city/firefighters are using new tools and resources to make your community safer.

The right time for the right message

Below, you will find some general thoughts on time considerations and sensitivities. Every fire and community will be different, so adjust for each situation.

Active fire (first 48 hours — evacuations)

While directly impacted communities focus on survival, the greatest opportunity to engage community members about upstream solutions is in adjacent communities. If the fire is extremely large or in a major city, this presents an opportunity to engage national, statewide, and regional media in other communities. This is also a window to engage policymakers, such as those representing neighboring communities, and advise decision-makers.

- Lead with safety and empathy, and do not speculate.
- Thank first responders and community members who are working to address danger and protect lives, property, and ecosystems.
- Acknowledge the disproportionate impact on disadvantaged communities, including those who may not be able to evacuate due to disability, financial constraints, or medical issues (e.g., requiring access to medical equipment).
- Introduce prevention efforts without blame. Avoid debating how the crisis at hand could have been avoided or handled differently.
- Highlight upstream opportunities outside areas directly affected (e.g., adjacent community, state, and/or national media).

Short term (days to weeks — some containment)

Soon after a disaster, directly impacted communities begin looking for positive and hopeful stories. You can amplify success stories related to effective mitigation.

- Lead with hope and share success stories of homes or areas that survived due to mitigation.
- Where possible, highlight where planning worked (e.g., structures that have not burned or effective evacuation routes) so audience members look for positive, hopeful solutions.
- Share case studies and visuals about solutions.
- Introduce concrete asks.
- Emphasize action, the ability to control risk in the future, and that we're all in this together.

Post-event reflection and reimagining wildfire resilience (recovery phase within 90 days of the fire)

As recovery proceeds, assess the community's readiness to discuss upstream solutions that will mitigate future disasters and support wildfire resilience in the community and adjacent ecosystems.

- Talk about priorities in your community. What are the community-based, ecosystem-based, or technology solutions that can make a difference?
- Communicate the value of beneficial fire, including controlled burns.
- Describe the role that local citizens can play in reducing wildfire risk (e.g., clearing dead vegetation on their property).
- As the community rebuilds, identify opportunities to make infrastructure more fire resilient.

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