

Determinants of public trust in natural resource management: fire and fuels management on the Bitterroot National Forest

Bill Borrie¹, Adam Liljebblad² and Alan Watson³

¹ Associate Professor, University of Montana, Missoula, USA, bill.borrie@umontana.edu

² Conservation Programs Officer, National Forest Foundation, Missoula, USA,
aliljebblad@natlforests.org

³ Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, Missoula, USA, awatson@fs.fed.us

Management of natural resources occurs today with high levels of public scrutiny and controversy. To succeed, managers seek the support, involvement, and endorsement of the public. When trust is present, parties are linked by social bonds, shared commitments and are able to interact openly and honestly. When trust is deficient, parties lack the bonds that permit open, honest communication, and generally resort to defensive, confrontational or insular behavior. This study examines the public's trust as a measure of managerial success, and attempts to identify and measure the components that most influence it. A review of trust literature yielded 14 attributes that were hypothesized to contribute to trust, grouped into the three dimensions of Shared Norms and Values, Perceived Efficacy, and Willingness to Endorse. Operationalizing these attributes and dimensions, a telephone survey was developed and administered to a sample of Montana, USA residents living adjacent to the Bitterroot National Forest (N=1152). Structural equation modeling was used to examine the hypothesized relationship among trust contributors and all 14 attributes were found to be influential contributors to levels of trust. Results suggest that if managers are to maintain or increase levels of public trust, they need to consider trust's attributes as they make social, ecological, and economic resource decisions.