

The Applegate then and now — Have we changed much?

BY SANDY SHAFFER

As part of a larger two-county project conducted by the Rogue Valley Fire Prevention Cooperative (RVFPC), residents of the Applegate Watershed (Jackson and Josephine Counties only) were recently surveyed by mail regarding wildfire and forest issues. Three other “communities” were also surveyed at the same time this spring, and you’ll probably be hearing about this project quite a bit through our local media. However, I wanted to share some comparisons with you Applegate Watershed residents because we had also conducted public opinion surveys in 2003-04, and I found some interesting comparisons with this spring’s survey.

Compared to Seven Years Ago

One of the biggest changes in the mail surveys done in 2004 and 2011 was the response rate. In 2004 we averaged an overall 28% return rate; this year our overall Applegate response rate was 45%! This return rate “exceeded the national standard for mail-in surveys” according to Southern Oregon University’s Research Center (SOURCE), which implemented our survey this spring. This dramatic response can be attributed to the strong outreach and education programs that the RVFPC and the local fire plan groups have implemented over the past decade.

Demographically, our average age is seven years older (duh...), our education levels are slightly lower, the size of our households has shrunk to two persons, and more than three-fourths of us live on property in the 1-to-20-acre range. Thirty-six percent of the Applegate respondents have lived in southern Oregon for over 30 years, with another 17% here 21-30 years.

Seven years ago, 20% of

respondents in the Applegate had never heard of the term “defensible space.” Today, 97% of Applegaters responding to the survey said they had created a defensible space around their home, and 90% said that they were also maintaining it each year. Quite a change! The top three reasons for doing so were basically the same in 2004 and this year: home and property protection, personal safety, and responsibility as a property owner. Interestingly, the fact that there is a state law requiring defensible space, and what our neighbors might or might not be doing, were not strong factors for creating one’s defensible space.

In both surveys we asked where folks get information about forest conditions and wildfires, and the results have changed over time. In 2004, newspapers (including the *Applegater*) were No. 1, state and county agencies were No. 2, and federal land management agencies tied with television for the No. 3 spot. In 2011, television was No. 1, newspapers were No. 2, and radio was No. 3.

Interestingly, federal agencies dropped from third to eighth place as an information resource. I wonder whether the high ranking in 2004 was because we had wildfires on federal lands here in the Applegate and federal land managers were out providing timely information to us during those events. We haven’t (as I write this) had a major fire incident for several years.

Another question that was repeated in this year’s survey was whether

we Applegaters differentiate between smoke from wildfires in the summer and that from prescribed burn treatments in the off-season. The answer is yes we do, but our view has shifted a bit. Between 2004 and now, the number of Applegaters who feel that smoke from wildfires is a serious issue rose 17%. Those who feel that smoke from prescribed fires is an issue

rose by 20%. So, even though significantly more people (24% total) consider smoke from wildfires a more serious issue than from prescribed fires, the fact that both numbers

are going up is an indication of attitude changes. Perhaps this is because the federal land managers have been doing so much thinning, pile-burning and under-burn maintenance out here to reduce the hazard in our federal forests.

We also asked again this year what needs or issues were top priority to Applegate residents, and while there were changes, these were not a surprise, at least to me. In 2004, Jackson County Applegaters ranked fuel reduction, limiting land development and environmental protection as No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3, respectively, with public safety (traffic) ranked No. 4. Those in Josephine County named fuel reduction and limiting land development as No. 1 and No. 2, respectively, with job/economic development and environmental protection tied for No. 3.

This year Jackson County residents named jobs/economic development, education, sustainable water supply and environmental protection as their top four (in that order). Josephine County

folks had slightly different priorities. They named jobs/economic development as No. 1, followed by education, public safety (other than traffic), and sustainable water supply.

Compared to Other Communities?

This year our survey allowed us to compare the Applegate with three other communities that received the exact same surveys: the Greensprings area, the Seven Basins Watersheds, and Ashland’s Wildfire Hazard Zone. All communities had fantastic, record-breaking response rates—again attributable to the high degree of public outreach in the areas. Ashland’s rate was a whopping 59% - probably due in part, to the recent Oak Knoll Fire!

There were a couple of things that stood out about the Applegate’s responses, but not as much as I had expected. Our responses were actually very similar to those from the Seven Basins Watersheds, particularly in the size of parcels we own, and our top local priority needs. Also, our perception of and concern about personal risk from wildfires were both lower than that of Greensprings and Ashland areas.

Maybe that’s because the Applegate had the highest percentage of folks who had created defensible space? And, 62% responded that they do have an evacuation plan in place! We’re ready, right?! We also were more concerned about noxious weeds and smoke from prescribed fire treatments than the other communities. And, the responses showed that we were more aware of State Senate Bill #360, so the Oregon Department of Forestry should be pleased with us!

This fall, we in the RVFPC hope to survey several other communities in the two-county area to further help everyone address wildfire issues in the Rogue Valley. We sincerely thank all of you Applegaters who participated in this survey, and here’s to a quiet summer fire season!

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