**The Fire Workers’ Quick Guide to Successful Media Interviews**

**Why is this important?**

* Organizations that conduct controlled burns need public support in order to accomplish their goals.
* Most people learn about wildland fire primarily by reading, watching, and hearing various sources of media.
* The news media strongly influences public perception of wildland fire through its portrayal of fire workers and wildland fire incidents.
* You are the subject matter expert, and the public respects and listens to your opinion.

These simple tips will help hone your skills and boost your confidence to successfully deliver your messages to the people who need to hear them.

**Pre-Interview:**

* MEMORIZE your top three talking points or key messages, including the basic facts that support them. Choose topics with which you are most familiar. Make them concise and easy to comprehend.
* Prepare answers for the questions you expect. Word your answers so they will stand alone, and try to always target at least one of your key messages.
* When asked to participate in an interview, you should know and prepare accordingly for the following:
* Who is conducting the interview?
* When and where will the interview take place?
* What will you say in the interview? You must anticipate what the reporter might ask.
* Practice, practice, practice!!!

**Interview:**

* Always remember that you are in control. You dictate the setting, the mood, the message(s), the pace, the tone, the delivery, and the overall quality of the interview.
* Wear your required Personal Protective Equipment including a hard hat. Remove your sunglasses or shaded eyeglasses, as long as it’s safe to do so. Establish eye contact with the interviewer; do not look directly at the camera.
* Keep still and allow your hands to rest naturally at your sides. Use slow, purposeful hand gestures for emphasis, but use them sparingly. Avoid swaying, bouncing, nodding your head, playing with your face or hair, and leaning toward or touching the microphone. All body movement is exaggerated on camera.
* Speak slowly and confidently and **do not use technical language**. Keep in mind that your audience will likely be unfamiliar with fire line terminology, acronyms, and abbreviations. In general, it’s safe to imagine that you are talking to a junior high class, but **know your audience and tailor your message(s) accordingly.**
* Communicate your primary, most important message in your first sentence. This is usually an assurance that safety is paramount and all feasible precautions are in place. Throughout the rest of the interview, you should continuously work to bring the discussion back to your key message(s). Try, however, to connect your work to things that matter to most people: clean air, clean water, healthy forests and grasslands, jobs, etc.
* Remember to use applicable (short) personal stories, colorful analogies, and a captivating backdrop - they help paint a picture of the situation for your audience.
* Follow “yes” and “no” responses with an explanation. Attempt to answer questions in approximately 20 seconds (2-3 sentences) then stop talking. As long as you are satisfied with the answer, don’t change it. If you misspeak or make an error, simply stop and say: “Let me start again,” then restate your response.
* Do not try to fill “dead air” or silence. That’s the reporter’s responsibility. If you don’t know the answer to a question, say so. Promise to follow up later with a response, and keep your promise. NEVER say: “No comment.” It immediately raises red flags and calls into question your honesty and credibility.
* Don’t interrupt the interviewer, regardless of what they are saying. Wait for them to finish before responding. If a question contains misinformation, correct the inaccuracy then circle back to your key message(s).
* Despite how they may come across, treat every question seriously. If it is completely off-topic, out of line, or heading the wrong direction, simply rephrase the question and bring the conversation back to your key message(s). Here are a few examples:
* “I think what you are asking is [key message]”
* “\_\_\_\_\_ is certainly important, but what is more important in fire right now is [key message]!”
* “That is an important question, but your viewers might be more concerned about [key message].”
* “Probably the most important point to remember is [key message].”
* Be polite, honest, and attentive. Smile when appropriate, but don’t overdo it.
* Close by repeating your key messages.

**Post-Interview:**

* Provide any clarification necessary and elaborate on anything that may have been unclear or misinterpreted. Follow-up with any promised information.
* Thank the reporter for the interview.

**Key Messages for the 2014 Niobrara Valley Preserve TREX** (know 2-3 well and be aware of the top 5)**:**

1. **Safety is paramount**. That’s why we burn when we do and why we anchor into previously burned areas, perform extensive planning, relentlessly monitor weather conditions, meet national standards for fire workers, and coordinate with local fire departments and other highly experienced personnel. Recent fires - not just in Nebraska but also across the U.S. - were an important reminder of the urgent need to proactively manage our forests and grasslands. Tree thinning, grazing, and controlled burns are proven to reduce flammable vegetation and help lessen the potential for future catastrophes.
2. **Fire training is necessary and important**. This exchange fills an important role: increasing fire capacity across the U.S. at a time when this knowledge and experience is in high demand. It’s an issue most everyone can agree on, as evidenced by the numerous private and public entities that have assembled to make this happen. These include the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Fire Learning Network, Firestorm, Great Plains Fire Science Exchange, National Park Service, Nebraska Environmental Trust, Nebraska Forest Service, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Nebraska Natural Legacy Project, Niobrara Council, Pheasants Forever, The Nature Conservancy, U.S.D.A. Forest Service, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.
3. **Like rain, fire is critical in the Great Plains**. Controlled burning is a necessary part of habitat restoration and protection in many landscapes. Proactive actions like these are better for people, water, and wildlife.
4. **Pay now, or pay later.** Nebraska spent $12 million on fire suppression in 2012 (Nebraska Forest Service). From a strictly economic perspective, it is cheaper and more effective to keep woody fuels from building up than it is to deal with out-of-control blazes. Ranchers lose money on every grazing acre that is lost to cedar encroachment.
5. **The next generation of conservationists is taking fire leadership seriously**. Fifty members of the Student Association for Fire Ecology (S.A.F.E.) from five universities are spending their spring breaks learning at the Niobrara Valley Preserve. S.A.F.E. is a college club that supports students studying fire ecology. These students will learn how to use equipment, ignite fires, and plan controlled burns. They will also study the effects of fire on grasslands by visiting controlled burn sites completed over the last few years.
6. Building on past successes and lessons learned, the training exchanges have grown every year, attracting more partners and participants from around the U.S. and the world. People who have met in Nebraska have gone on to host training events in South Africa and Spain.
7. Fire effects at the Niobrara Valley Preserve, such as erosion and large numbers of dead tree skeletons standing across the landscape, are dramatic reminders of what unchecked, excessive fuel loads and drought will produce. In contrast, forests and grasslands that have had the benefit of mechanical clearing and fire continue to provide healthier, more resilient ecosystems.

\*\*\*Portions of the information above were adapted from *A Guide to Successful Media Interviews* (NIFC, 2009), located at: <http://www.nifc.gov/PIO_bb/Background/NIFC-MediaInterviewGuide2009-Landscape.pdf>.