



Center for Public Issues Education
IN AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES
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executive summary

Focus Group & Employee Survey

Florida Forest Service

Wednesday, December 14, 2011

Introduction

The Florida Forest Service (FFS) commissioned the Center for Public Issues Education in Agriculture and Natural Resources (PIE Center) to conduct focus group research of Florida residents' perceptions of forestry and FFS. An online survey also explored the perceptions of FFS employees. This research coincided with the organization's change from Division of Forestry (DOF) to the Florida Forest Service.

Six focus groups were conducted in September in Florida: two in Orlando, two in Tallahassee, one in Gainesville, and one in Ft. Myers. The Gainesville focus group and one of the Tallahassee focus groups included rural residents. The focus groups were audio and video recorded to ensure accuracy during analysis. In October, FFS employees were sent the online survey. Approximately 1,175 employees were sent the survey and 683 responded (58.1% response rate).

Findings

Focus Groups

Focus group participants held positive views of forests and government organizations that protected forests. They considered people, fire, and natural threats, such as invasive species, threats to forests. When provided a definition of forest management, there was some confusion from participants in connecting "business resources" as a component of forest management.

When asked to name the organization responsible for forests, participants did not make the association to DOF or FFS by name, though Department of Forestry was mentioned. The participants associated forest management, wildfire prevention and suppression, parks/park rangers, and fish and wildlife with DOF/FFS. The participants believed focusing on FFS's work on forests and protecting of forests could differentiate FFS from similar organizations.

Response to the name change was mixed. The name sounded helpful to some, but it did not change perceptions for some participants and confused others. The new name differentiated FFS from the other organizations because it linked FFS to Florida and forests, but the participants felt the name created similarities to the other organizations by incorporating "service."

For the logo, the trees and the badge shape were focal points of participants' comments. For some of the participants, the trees in the logo identified the context of FFS's work, but some participants wanted different trees. The badge shape elicited perceptions of authority from participants, which was considered positive

For FFS pamphlets, the participants liked the design of the *Welcome to...* pamphlets more than the *Checklist of Birds* pamphlets. However, they felt the size of the logo on both sets of pamphlets was too small. Participants were mixed about where the logo should be placed on the printed pieces. Many of the participants disliked the commissioner and director names on the front of the pamphlets.

When asked about the target audience of FFS, participants believed the audiences included everybody but named children/schools and forest users as more specific audiences. When asked what means should be used to communicate FFS's purpose, the participants said multiple media sources, including Internet, broadcast, billboards/signs, events, and paper-based communications. When asked which communication channels FFS should use to reach the participants directly, preferences varied. For communicating emergency information, the participants recommended broadcast and direct contacts to their phones. Overall, the participants recommended increasing communications with the public to increase awareness of FFS among the public.

The participants also completed a questionnaire about their awareness and perceived importance of different FFS activities. Participants were most aware of fire- and tree-related activities. They were least aware of recreation activities and watershed protection. They felt fire prevention/suppression, tree planting, and response to emergencies were the most important to them as individuals and to the state. They deemed recreation activities to be least important to them as individuals and to the state.

Employee Survey

Employees were asked to rate their perceptions of various FFS activities, including the importance of FFS to the state of Florida, importance for differentiating FFS from similar organizations, and how informed the public is of the FFS activities. All of the activities listed were considered important by the employees, though wildfire activities and multiuse management were rated as most important. Employees perceived wildfire activities as the most important for differentiating FFS from similar organizations, while recreation and landowner assistance were perceived as the least important for differentiation. Employees considered wildfire prevention and suppression the primary functions of FFS.

Employees believed the public was most informed of FFS's wildfire activities and was least informed of FFS's non-wildfire emergency response. Employees also believed they held more favorable perceptions of FFS than the public did. Employees believed the general public's opinions were the most important to FFS, while special interest groups were the least important.

The employees held positive perceptions of the organization's mission statement, believed the mission statement was an accurate reflection of FFS, and that the mission statement helped differentiate FFS from similar organizations. The employees held mixed views when asked if the name change was a good idea and if the name was effective for communicating the duties of FFS.

Employees believed external communication by FFS was important, but they viewed the external communications as only slightly effective and slightly consistent. For communicating FFS's duties to the public, TV, websites, and print articles were considered the most important communication channels, while text messaging, e-mail, and social media were the least important for this purpose. For communicating emergency information, TV and radio were viewed as the most important communication channels, while text messaging was viewed as the least important.

Employees believed internal communication was important, but they viewed internal communication as only slightly effective and slightly consistent. Employees believed their supervisors were the most accurate source of information about FFS. When asked where they would like to receive the majority of their information about FFS, e-mail was the preferred source of most information. However, more employees wanted to receive the majority of their organizational information

from supervisors than was currently the case. Some employees also stated they did not have access to necessary technologies, such as Internet, required for workplace communication.

When asked about their awareness of field unit issues, respondents said they were aware of field unit issues. The employees were unaware of issues outside their field unit but believed their immediate supervisor was aware of state-level FFS issues. They did not believe state office employees were aware of field unit issues. The employees' morale was mixed, but they felt overall morale was low. When employees were asked what they felt was the best way to increase morale, increasing pay was the most frequent response. Aside from pay, appreciation and recognition good work were the other ways to improve morale. The employees believed funding, employee morale, and political support were the most serious problems facing FFS.

Recommendations

External

FFS needs to increase its communications with the public and use multiple channels to do so, such as broadcast media, websites, and face-to-face interactions. To target children, increasing FFS interactions at schools could be beneficial. For forest users, holding promotions at recreation-oriented stores could increase the salience of the organization. For emergency information, FFS should use broadcast media and technology similar to REVERSE 911 to reach people's phones directly.

The focus groups participants had difficulty differentiating FFS from similar organizations, often perceiving that there was overlap. The aspect of FFS protecting Florida forests should be a focus during interactions with the public, when creating communications materials, and working with the media. By focusing on this message, FFS can differentiate itself from similar organizations.

FFS should remain consistent in the branding and design of all promotional materials to help audiences recognize that FFS is the source for the materials. To do so, make the logo large enough that people do not have difficulty seeing it and place the logo where it can be seen without distracting from the materials. To avoid confusion, the relationship between FDACS and FFS should be made clear when both entities' names are on the materials.

Internal

FFS needs to ensure open communications occur. For instance, when all employees need information, send it directly to them instead of going through intermediaries. There were employees who complained about not receiving information in a timely fashion because the information was being relayed through supervisors instead of being sent directly to the employees. Also be sure that communications are two-way, not one-way, because employees did not always feel they were being heard by superiors.

Ensure access to adequate technologies for all employees. Some employees reported not having access to required technologies, such as Internet, which inhibited their ability to participate in FFS's internal communications.

A problem affecting morale was employees not feeling recognized and appreciated for their work. This includes a lack of recognition in FFS and from the general public. FFS should encourage more frequent recognition of employees' work, formally and informally. FFS should ensure it receives credit in the media for the work it does. This can help employees not feel overshadowed by other organizations in addition to increasing the public's recognition of FFS.

FFS needs to lessen the gap between Tallahassee and field offices. One option is to increase the presence of Tallahassee personnel at field offices by having a variety of Tallahassee personnel visit the field offices more frequently. These visits could lessen the psychological distance between Tallahassee and the field offices. This can also be an opportunity to show appreciation for the work field-unit employees are doing.