ABSTRACT

THESIS: Social Science in the Wildland-Urban Interface: Wildland Fire Management and Risk in the Greater Hoosier National Forest Area; an Integrated Approach

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Efforts to suppress wildfires in the past decade have become increasingly difficult. Increased costs, threats to firefighter safety, accumulating fuel from past wildfire suppression, and detrimental impacts to ecosystems have all been compounded by increasing populations in formerly wild space. Although wildfire is typically perceived as a Western problem, the majority of wildland-urban interface (WUI) land is actually in the Eastern United States (Radeloff et al. 2005). Indiana itself has 142 municipalities or census designated places that are at high risk from wildfire (66 FR 751). Many of these WUI communities are in a nine county area in South-Central Indiana in which the Hoosier National Forest (HNF) has landholdings. Increased development and population in this region has resulted in a complex, parcelized landscape with intermixed private and public lands, making wildfire management and mitigation strategies difficult for natural resource professionals. This research addresses perceptions of wildfire and prescribed fire among residents across public/private lands within the WUI in the greater HNF area. It utilizes GIS and key informant interviews as an analytical tool to design a random sample mail survey to gain a better sense of residents’ perceptions of risk and their attitudes toward wildfire management and mitigation. Study outcomes will be used to help wildfire and natural resource professionals in the greater HNF area understand the social and physical complexities influencing WUI residents’ perceptions of risk and develop strategies based on research findings to build adaptive capacity among WUI residents that is specific and relevant at the local and regional level in South-Central Indiana.