

The effect of description of fire status and wind change information on firefighter's perception of risk

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Abstract

The aim of the research was to determine whether firefighter risk perceptions varied depending on whether fire status was framed as either “going” or “contained” and to determine the effect of wind change information on ratings of risk. The sample comprised 139 career and volunteer CFA firefighters recruited from a variety of rural regions. Participants were asked to rate the same scenario for risk with the fire status being described as either going or contained. A going fire was rated as significantly more risky than a contained fire, despite the same fire ground conditions being described, thus suggesting a general framing effect which could compromise firefighter safety. Career firefighters and those with greater experience with wildfire did not differ in their risk ratings of a going vs. contained fire suggesting that less experienced firefighters are likely to be more prone to the framing effect of fire status. Participants were then told that either: a) a wind change was expected; or b) was not expected and asked to further rate the risk of the situation. Ratings of risk significantly increased with news that a wind change was expected, regardless of fire status. Ratings of risk significantly decreased with news that a wind change was not expected, again, regardless of fire status. It was concluded that those conducting fire ground briefings need to be mindful of the effect of framing of fire status and expectations of stability on risk perception and take active steps to make risk cognitively salient to firefighters.

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