

WILDFIRES AND TOURIST BEHAVIORS IN FLORIDA



Executive Summary

By

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Wildfires can pose a serious threat to tourism, a main economic engine in virtually all states. A representative sample of 771 tourists (66% response rate) to Florida counties that had a recent wildfire and received fire suppression funds completed a mailback survey that assessed their perception of risk, attitudes and knowledge towards wildfire, and behavioral changes due to them. In general, wildfires have had a minimal impact on past Florida trips and most feel there is little risk for future trips. Although 61% agreed that wildfires were a factor in evaluating travel destination, 70% also reported that they would not let wildfires keep them from traveling to their final destination in Florida. Florida tourists varied in their knowledge about and understanding of the role of fire in Florida's landscape. Two-thirds of the tourists knew what a prescribed fire is, but only 25% thought the natural areas in Florida should be burned periodically. Other questions revealed that three situations would result in substantial alteration (cancel or change destinations) to their trip by about half of the tourists. These were the presence of high fire danger conditions; reported health problems from smoke and ash, and the spread of fire to a nearby vacation region. The report further discusses the implications for these and other findings for land management decisions, tourism promotion and communications in general.