



School of Natural Resources
and the Environment

Seminar Series: Fall 2022

BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE: HOW NATURAL DISASTERS AFFECT SUPPORT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

SPEAKER: Elizabeth Baldwin, UA SGPP

DATE: Wednesday, October 5

TIME: 3:00-4:00 pm

LOCATION: ENR2 S107 & [Zoom](#)



ABSTRACT:

Despite relatively high levels of citizen concern about environmental issues, environmental policy is often characterized by policy inaction rather than policy action. Conventional wisdom suggests that environmental disasters can act as “focusing events” to prompt policy change, but empirical studies provide conflicting evidence about whether and how such events actually increase public support for environmental policies (Latre et al. 2017; Bishop 2014). This paper analyzes data from a survey of Pima County, Arizona residents’ knowledge and attitudes toward buffelgrass, an invasive grass that is associated with ecological harm and increased fire risk in Arizona’s Sonoran Desert. We collect data on citizens’ exposure to the 2020 Bighorn Fire, a “focusing event” that drew area residents’ attention to the wildfire risks of invasive grasses. We embed a choice experiment within a natural experiment to assess whether respondents (n=499) whose friends or family members were evacuated during a major wildfire are more likely to vote “yes” to a hypothetical ballot initiative that would fund removal of invasive grasses that contribute to wildfire risk. Results show that those who personally knew evacuees are less sensitive to program costs, and more likely to support policies that prioritize homes over ecological goals. Results provide theoretically relevant knowledge about how citizens’ support for environmental policy is affected by natural disasters, as well as practical knowledge about the likelihood that Pima County residents would support a referendum to address buffelgrass.