

PYROGANDA: CREATING NEW TERMS AND IDENTITIES FOR PROMOTING FIRE USE IN ECOLOGICAL FIRE MANAGEMENT

Timothy Ingalsbee¹

Abstract—Much of the language used by the wildland fire community and news media has implicit anti-fire bias that perpetuates anti-fire attitudes. In order to promote greater fire use for ecological fire management, new words need to be created; existing words should be redefined; and new identities for fire management workers must be developed. FUSEE presents some examples of the new words, symbols, and slogans it uses in its public education and policy advocacy work to nurture pro-fire attitudes and help support a paradigm shift in fire management. This paper argues that other agencies, organizations, and institutions in the wildland fire community will have to engage in an explicit pro-fire “pyroganda” campaign to help counter its historic anti-fire propaganda and inspire necessary changes in consciousness and behavior in the public and fire management workforce. As part and parcel of this effort, FUSEE proposes renaming wildland firefighters as fire rangers.

INTRODUCTION

Defined in neutral, objective terms by sociologists, propaganda refers to the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape public perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve desired social goals. A classic in-group/out-group double standard exists in the use of propaganda, however. Government agencies’ public service announcements and corporations’ advertisements are rarely viewed as propagandistic, while the statements and slogans of foreign governments or nonprofit advocacy groups are often labeled as propaganda. Hence, propaganda has become a pejorative term in American society; however, the historic efforts by Federal land management agencies and the news media to affect the American public’s beliefs and behaviors in support of wildfire prevention and suppression rightfully should be acknowledged as propagandistic.

Beyond public campaigns to gain citizen support for fire prevention or suppression programs, much of the terminology used in wildland fire management lends itself to propaganda in that it is not unbiased or value-neutral, but rather, heavily slanted by militaristic discourse and terminology that foments anti-fire attitudes. Suppression terms like fire fighting, initial attack, strike teams, aggressive suppression, etc. represent concepts and a mindset that suited 20th century attitudes about wildfire as an enemy or threat to natural resources and human communities. But these words fail to accurately describe emerging pro-fire policies and practices to use fire as a management tool—and respect wildfire as a natural process—to further goals of protecting communities and restoring ecosystems. Accordingly, if the wildland fire

community wants to help society forge a new relationship with wildland fire and garner more public support for fire use, then new words, symbols, and identities will have to be consciously created as part of a paradigm shift towards ecological fire management.

PYROGANDA BY GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND THE NEWS MEDIA

I will use the word pyroganda to refer to efforts to propagandize the public and workers to influence their attitudes and actions in regard to wildland fire. Pyroganda can be used to stimulate anti-fire beliefs and behaviors to further wildfire prevention and suppression goals, or pro-fire beliefs and behaviors to further fire use and restoration goals, and I will be offering suggestions for the latter. Historically, most pyroganda has been State-sponsored and intended to create anti-wildfire attitudes in the general public. The clearest example is the Smokey Bear campaign and its gallery of wildfire prevention posters and slogans. The Smokey Bear campaign was a joint creation of the U.S. Forest Service and the War Advertising Council—a propaganda organ that was part of mobilizing the American people to support the war effort of the 1940s. World War II era posters that said “Forest Fires Aid the Enemy” provided a conceptual bridge to the notion that forest fires are the enemy (fig. 1). Long after the Second World War ended, the war on wildfire continued.

State-sponsored pyroganda has been echoed and amplified by corporate news media. Sensationalistic headlines constantly depict wildfires as catastrophes, associating them almost exclusively with disaster, death,

¹Timothy Ingalsbee, Executive Director, Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE), Eugene, OR 97405

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and destruction. Journalists often emulate the style of war reporting in their stories, using dramatic terms and images that focus on firefighters bravely battling blazes. The constant framing of wildfires as catastrophes and suppression operations as fire fighting obscures the social and ecological benefits of fire and thwarts the use of alternative management techniques such as fire use. Unfortunately, what most people know and believe about wildfires comes via news stories, so if the bulk of news coverage is slanted by the use of anti-fire language, then it is not surprising that anti-fire attitudes persist despite the recent efforts of some fire professionals to explain the benefits of natural fire ecology processes or progressive fire use policies.

As an intentional State policy to manipulate the behavior of citizens to prevent wildfires, and as a deliberate strategy by the news media to attract more readers and viewers, State-sponsored and media-supported anti-fire pyroganda has been very successful. However, now that fire management agencies desire to use more prescribed and wildland fires to restore and maintain fire-adapted ecosystems, many fire managers are bemoaning the “Smokey Bear syndrome” that prompts public complaints to prescribed burning and politicians’ pressure for aggressive wildfire suppression. In essence, fire management agencies have become victims of their past success as propagandists. If agencies are to cultivate public support for greater fire use in land management, then they will have to conduct a deliberate fire promotion campaign with as much vigor and commitment as they conducted their fire prevention campaign. That campaign will require new pro-fire language.

FIREFIGHTERS UNITED FOR SAFETY, ETHICS, AND ECOLOGY (FUSEE)

Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE) is a nonprofit organization founded in 2005. Our members are current, retired, and former wildland firefighters from Federal and State agencies, private companies, and rural volunteers; fire researchers and managers; educators and students; and other interested citizens. Our mission is to do public education and policy advocacy to promote greater firefighter and public safety, ethical use of taxpayer funds and resources, and ecological protection and restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems. Our ultimate goal is to help nurture a paradigm shift in fire management policies and practices that changes society’s relationship with wildland fire.

FUSEE produces white papers and press statements into which we devote significant creative energy to deconstruct conventional fire management terminology and rearticulate or invent new concepts or phrases that

we hope will help shift public consciousness and agency behavior. FUSEE focuses its public education projects mainly on re-educating journalists about fire ecology and management, believing that if we can alter the way the news media talk about fire then this will have a larger impact on changing public attitudes and opinions. FUSEE has produced a series of manuals and tipsheets called *A Reporter’s Guide to Wildland Fire*. We encourage reporters to go beyond the war reporting approach to covering wildfire events and offer suggestions for alternative words, angles, and frames to use in writing news stories about wildfire events and the full breadth of fire management issues and activities beyond firefighting.

The Reporter’s Guide contains a section that we call “All the Words Fit to Print.” It displays a table of terms ranging from what we consider to be “loaded” terms (i.e., official words that are biased or slanted to induce anti-fire attitudes), “neutral” terms (i.e., less biased or more objective terms), and “new” terms (i.e., words that could nurture pro-fire attitudes). For example, we present “natural disaster” as a loaded term, “natural disturbance” as more neutral, and “ecological stimulus” as a preferred new term. *The Reporter’s Guide* encourages journalists to discard loaded terms and start using what we call neutral or new terms in their stories. Admittedly, our proposed new terms are as, if not more, loaded as conventional terms, but the difference is that we are consciously trying to craft pro-fire language to counter the anti-fire bias in current official fire management terminology.

OLD SYMBOLS AND NEW MEANINGS IN LOGOS AND SLOGANS

In addition to creating new words and redefining old words, FUSEE aims to shift consciousness through the use of symbols and slogans. Symbols offer a means of conveying messages and meanings, and the most powerful persuasive messages come from traditional symbols that are rearticulated with new meanings. A traditional symbol used in fire management is the fire combustion triangle (heat, oxygen, fuel) and the fire environment triangle (weather, topography, fuel). Triangles are used in several logos of fire-related organizations (fig. 2). For example, the U.S. Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management, the Fire Research and Management Exchange System, and the Society of Fire Protection Engineers all utilize the triangle as core graphical elements of their logos.

FUSEE has also incorporated the triangle in its organizational logo, and we use it to symbolize our concept of the “FUSEE triad.” The three legs of our triangle refer to safety, ethics, and ecology, and represent our core belief that firefighter safety is fundamentally interconnected with professional and public service ethics, and ecological

protection and restoration. If you compromise the integrity of one leg of that triad, the system fails or collapses. Thus, for example, if ecological integrity is compromised through inappropriate land management or fire suppression actions, then these will ultimately negatively impact firefighter safety on future wildfire incidents. The symbol of the triangle is a deliberate part of our pyroganda to persuade the fire community to manage wildfires in ways that link firefighter safety with ethical and ecological management actions.

In general, organizations doing propaganda should pay attention to the spelling and phonetics of their organizational acronyms, and where these acronyms symbolize meaningful words or images, they are more likely to rally community or public support. FUSEE spent some effort creating a name for our organization that has an acronym that also symbolizes a meaningful word to firefighters. FUSEE (pronounced “FEW-zee”) represents a fusee, the hand-held torch used by wildland firefighters. Hotshots and smokejumpers consider fusees to be safety items they can use to burn out safety zones in situations where they may face entrapment or burnover. They are also used to ignite burnouts or backfires to contain or control wildfires. FUSEE works to shift the primary use of fusees from stopping wildfires to be more associated with starting controlled fires for prescribed burns or wildland fire use. Reintroducing fire and restoring fire-adapted ecosystems—the occupational environment of firefighters—would proactively enhance the safety of fire crews. We have found that the fusee symbol usually prompts a smile among folks in the wildland fire community who appreciate its meaning; among citizens with no experience in fire management, it sometimes prompts confusion and a fair amount of mispronunciation (e.g. “fussy”). The real utility of our acronym, however, is its use as a symbol for the torchbearer.

The torchbearer is a traditional symbol that refers both to pathbreakers (or “trailblazers”) and advocates for social change. For example, the Statue of Liberty is a torchbearer who lights the path toward freedom and democracy in America, and advocates for the spread of freedom and democracy to other countries abroad. FUSEE has displayed a torchbearing hand in its logos and developed a motto that functions like our organizational tagline: “We’re torchbearers for a new fire management paradigm!” This symbolizes our unashamed role as advocates promoting fire use in safe, ethical, ecological fire management. We formed our nonprofit organization in large part to enable fire professionals working in government agencies or private companies to anonymously engage in progressive policy advocacy without facing job reprisals. The fusee torchbearer symbol thus works for

us in multiple ways to advocate for pro-fire policies and recruit more fire professionals as advocates (fig. 3).

PRO-FIRE MESSAGES AND FIRE PRO MESSENGERS

Effective propaganda creates memorable messages that articulate ideas and information in ways that inspire change in consciousness or behavior. FUSEE crafts messages that often revise, redefine, or reword existing messages from other organizations and agencies conducting their own pyroganda. For example, we believe that the official phrase “community wildfire protection” conveys an anti-fire message. It focuses on wildfire while excluding other kinds of fire (e.g., controlled burning, fire use), and adopts a defensive posture (i.e., wildfire is a threat we must protect ourselves from) while excluding other possible responses and relationships to fire.

Consequently, we revised that phrase to become “community fire preparation” because we feel it is a more inclusive message that opens up people to be prepared for fire in all its forms—prescribed fire, wildfire, and fire use. And preparation means not just defensively warding it off, but also taking proactive steps to possibly welcome it in! If homeowners have proactively prepared their properties using FireWise² principles, then wildfire may not be a threat, and prescribed burning may be a viable tool for managing fuels within the wildland-urban interface zone. Thus, we crafted the slogan, “The sooner communities are prepared for fire, the sooner ecosystems can be restored with fire.” The use of words like “for” and “with” denote a new non-antagonistic relationship with wildland fire and add to the implicitly pro-fire message that we hope will be persuasive with homeowners.

FUSEE continues to experiment with messages that we hope will resonate with the public, and equally if not more importantly, inspire fire management workers and managers. Referring to the FUSEE triad of safety, ethics, and ecology, people usually have clear ideas about the concepts of fire safety and fire ecology, but often ask what we mean by “fire ethics?” In response, FUSEE crafted a message to address this question, drawing upon the beloved figure of Aldo Leopold and his renowned concept of a land ethic. Paraphrasing Leopold, we articulated our own fire ethic:

“A thing is right when it contributes to the safety of firefighters and the public, ethical use of public resources, environmental protection of fire-affected landscapes, and ecological restoration of fire-dependent ecosystems. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

²National Fire Protection Association. 2014. FireWise Communities. <http://www.firewise.org/?sso=0>. [Date accessed: September 2014]

We also use Leopold’s metaphor of “green fire” as a symbol of wildness to create our slogan, “Keep the Greenfire burning!” Our use of green fire is intended to represent fire use for ecological restoration and a rewilding of landscapes altered by past fire suppression. Our hope is that such clear references to a beloved messenger will help make fire professionals more receptive to our message.

Research demonstrates that often the messenger is as important as the message itself in effective communication. In that respect, we founded FUSEE with the belief that wildland firefighters would make persuasive spokespersons for advocating change in fire management policies and practices. FUSEE has leveraged the iconic image of firefighters as heroes to bravely say what our supporters would not or could not say publicly for fear of job retributions from their employers, or political backlash from industry representatives and elected officials. FUSEE has produced several white papers and press statements that critique the safety risks to firefighters, economic costs to taxpayers, and ecological impacts to public wildlands that result from aggressive suppression actions. The news media are particularly keen to quote a firefighters’ group speaking out against controversial firefighting policies or incidents. Compared to other messengers like industry lobbyists or environmental activists, veteran firefighters can raise these criticisms and speak out on controversial fire issues with much more credibility.

PARTNERS IN FIRE EDUCATION

I was invited to a workshop in Boise in 2008 called, “Partners in Fire Education” (PIFE). Two major public opinion polling companies had just completed a national survey and a series of focus groups on public attitudes about the ecological role of fire and the role of fire management. After an hour-long presentation to professional fire educators and agency officials describing the survey sample, methods, and margins of error in their study that cost several tens of thousands of dollars, the polling companies boiled down their analysis to two recommendations for agencies to conduct more successful fire-related messaging:

- 1) When talking about fire issues to the public, if you can lead with safety-related messages, then this makes people more receptive to additional messages about fire issues.
- 2) In the eyes and ears of the public, firefighters are the most credible and persuasive messengers to deliver those messages because they are the ones on the front lines dealing with the full risks and consequences of fire.

At that point, several heads turned to look at me. I was more than embarrassed not only because I did not anticipate the sudden attention, but also because I knew that the name “Firefighters United for Safety...” was dreamed up by myself and a couple friends for the mere cost of a round of beers, a far cry from the companies’ expensive survey!

The recommendations of the PIFE pollsters seem to be validated by the excellent success that our young, small organization has enjoyed with the news media and policymakers. Measured both in terms of the quantity and quality of news articles that have quoted FUSEE members, we have had great success, indeed. We occasionally provide provocative statements that are intended to induce “shock and awe” that we hope will make people stop and think. For example, FUSEE criticized one of the dominant symbols and iconic media images of firefighting—fire retardant dumped by air tankers—because we were concerned about the environmental effects and economic costs of these toxic chemicals. The Los Angeles Times’ editors selected FUSEE’s statement to be the “pull quote” for their Pulitzer prize-winning story on the costs and impacts of aerial fire suppression.³

We believe that our success in getting high-profile quotes in the media is due as much to the novel messenger we are presenting—the voice of wildland firefighters—as it is due to the messages we are communicating that critique specific firefighting actions that are unsafe, expensive, or ecologically damaging. Our media messages sometimes get through to policymakers. For example, in response to increased public scrutiny and press coverage over aerial retardant, companies are redesigning the chemical composition of fire retardants, and the Forest Service has developed new policies to more carefully target retardant drops to avoid waterways.⁴

NEW IDENTITIES FOR FIRE MANAGEMENT WORKERS

Some people have pointed out the contradiction that our organization has firefighters in its name when, in actuality, many of our members are highly critical of certain firefighting policies and practices. Our philosophical opposition to the use of the war metaphor

³Cart, Julie, and Boxall, Bettina. 2008. Air tanker drops in wildfires are often just for show. The bulky aircraft are reassuring sights to those in harm’s way, but their use can be a needless and expensive exercise to appease politicians. Fire officials call them ‘CNN drops.’ *Los Angeles Times*. July 29.

⁴U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service. 2014. Interagency Policy for Aerial and Ground Delivery of Wildland Fire Chemicals Near Waterways and Other Avoidance Areas. <http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/retardant/>. [Date accessed: September 2014].

in fire management should logically extend to the term, “firefighter” and admittedly, we look forward to the day in the future when that word will become as obsolete and anachronistic as the word “smokechaser” is today. Consequently, we are striving to create a new word and identity for ecological fire management workers that will encompass the broad array of duties and functions they will be performing. Ideally, this new identity will be attractive to the fire community at the same time as it captures the news media’s and public’s imagination and maintains the high social esteem that people feel towards firefighters.

Fire-Lighters, Fire-Guiders, and Pyrotechnicians

In the early days of our organization’s founding, we initially experimented with using the terms “fire-lighters” and “fire-guiders.” They both rhyme with firefighters and more accurately describe the role of fire use workers starting prescribed fires and steering wildfires. But our supporters commented that these words conjured up images of arsonists, cigarette smokers, or New Age fire-walkers rather than fire use workers. We also tried out the term “pyrotechnicians.” This described our vision of fire use workers as high-skill/high-wage professionals using the best science and advanced technology to manage wildfire. However, too many people heard “pyro” as meaning arsonists and failed to hear “technicians,” so we stopped promoting that term, too. Besides, the word pyrotechnicians already refers to those that work with fireworks, and we want to see fire artfully applied down on the ground rather than up in the sky.

Firefighters as Cowboys or Native Americans?

For propaganda purposes, the best symbols to use are ones already embedded in the dominant culture and generating positive emotional responses. So what existing images could we adopt that would be positively accepted by wildland firefighters and the public and would nurture pro-fire attitudes in support of ecological fire management? How about cowboys? In fact, the image of loose-herding fires comes close to our vision of managing wildfires with fire use tactics. However, the cultural image and historical legacy of cowboys are mixed: they lived and worked on the land, but they also played an active role in domesticating western wildlands. This is not exactly the image we want to associate with fire restorationists.

How about Native Americans? Indeed, there is much that society could relearn about sustaining habitats from Native American burning practices. In fact, we have promoted the slogan, “Native forests need Native fires!” to symbolize our view that we need to reintroduce indigenous burning practices for both cultural and ecological restoration purposes. However, we are wary of cultural appropriation of Native Americans, so in our

view likening firefighters to Native Americans would be inappropriate.

Firefighters as Shepherds or Stewards?

FUSEE wants to link ecological fire management with the concept of land stewardship, so what other cultural images might make that connection? Would shepherds or stewards work well as new identities for firefighters? Although these identities may better symbolize the monitoring work of fire use tactics, images of shepherds passively watching over tender flocks of flames misses something important to many individuals attracted to present-day firefighting: the adventure and adrenaline rush of working alongside uncontrolled flames. They enjoy the adventure of jumping out of airplanes, flying in helicopters, hiking in rugged country, cutting and digging line alongside wild fire. A kind of macho militarist bravado endures in firefighter culture that is sustained by agency terminology (e.g., one of the Ten Standard Orders is to “fight fire aggressively...”) and the news media’s penchant for portraying firefighters as brave heroes. We doubt that firefighters would accept trading away their heroic warrior identity for that of a shepherd or steward. Besides, if the objectives of a given fire change from fire use for ecological restoration to full suppression for community protection, then workers will need an empowering identity that addresses the extra risk and need for bravery that comes from suppressing rather than stewarding flames. There must be some alternative to an aggressive soldier or passive steward type of identity that empowers active fire management for ecological restoration with all the adventure and hard work that will entail, but discards images of machismo or militarism.

Firefighters as Rangers?

According to the PIFE poll, after wildland firefighters the occupations with the most public credibility on wildfire issues were park and forest rangers. What if firefighters were identified as rangers? While the National Park Service (NPS) is comfortable identifying its seasonal employees as rangers, the U.S. Forest Service reserves that identity for its District line officers and does not share it with other permanent or seasonal employees. Regardless, most citizens identify workers in the NPS and Forest Service as “rangers.” Rangers in the Forest Service have long been focused on firefighting, while rangers in the NPS have long been focused on law enforcement. There is nothing essentialist about social identities; rather, each identity must be consciously defined and articulated. Simply renaming firefighters as rangers could continue to be linked in peoples’ minds with firefighting or policing rather than fire use for ecological restoration.

In FUSEE’s opinion, re-identifying firefighters as fire rangers has the most potential for symbolizing the full

spectrum of possible roles and duties needed by fire use workers in ecological fire management, but it all depends on how this identity is articulated. For example, Ontario, Canada has been calling its firefighters “fire rangers” since the late 1800s, but their work is exclusively focused on fire prevention and suppression. There is nothing essential about social identities—they all must be carefully defined and articulated—so as important as it is to make careful use of language, we cannot assume that simply changing the name to fire rangers will help shift the fire management paradigm from firefighting to fire-lighting and fire-guiding. The fire ranger concept must be part and parcel of a wider pyroganda campaign that promotes fire use for ecological fire management.

FIRE RANGERS USE FIRE FOR ECOLOGICAL FIRE MANAGEMENT

FUSEE’s conception of fire rangers is a work in progress, and we welcome input from other fire professionals. In our vision, natural ignitions will trigger opportunities for fire rangers to use fire for ecosystem restoration. Using the latest technology for monitoring, mapping, and modeling fire behavior and effects, fire rangers will actively manage wildland fires to accomplish preplanned restoration objectives, and dynamically shift their tactics and strategy according to current and expected conditions. They will be guiding fires as they range across the landscape, steering fires into places they want to burn and away from places that should not burn, slowing down or speeding up fire spread as the weather and fuel conditions warrant, stopping fires when they must, but starting them wherever they can. In essence, fire rangers will be doing something like a hybridized form of “prescribed natural fire use.”

For individuals who cherish the hard work and adventure of wildland firefighting, there will still be plenty of that in a job whose description is changed from fighting to managing and using fire. There will be lots of fire line construction; however, instead of reactively cutting fire lines in a suppression state of emergency, many fire lines will be proactively built as fuel breaks to facilitate the creation of firesheds for managing fire and fuels at landscape scales. And we will still need the ability to rapidly deploy crews in remote wildlands to manage ignitions, so smokejumpers, helitacks, helirappellers, and hotshot crews may become the vanguard of the fire rangers corps. While firefighters might lose some of their current status as heroes, we believe fire rangers may gain even more respect as healers—public servants doing the hard work of landscape stewardship and ecosystem restoration. They may even maintain that heroic image as they strive to ward off environmental disasters resulting from climate change.

CONCLUSION

On November 1, 2013, at the “Words on Fire: Toward a New Language of Wildland Fire” Symposium, renowned fire historian and keynote speaker, Dr. Stephen Pyne, argued that the words used by wildland fire management is out of sync with the needs of fire managers to increase the use of fire for ecological and cultural restoration goals. Although the National Wildfire Coordinating Group has repeatedly revised the official glossary of Federal fire management terms, some of these revisions have not always been well received by managers or effectively described the changing goals and objectives, strategies, and tactics of wildfire operations. Much of the current terminology of fire management unwittingly conveys an implicit anti-fire bias that historically functioned as propaganda to guide public and professional beliefs and behaviors toward wildfire. But now that fire ecology science and progressive policy changes are leading society towards a new relationship with wildland fire, the fire community must develop new language with deliberate intent to nurture changes in consciousness and behavior. Whether or not fire professionals can acknowledge this, this reeducation campaign will involve creating new propaganda or pyroganda.

Most fire management workers would rather be working with fire than fighting against it, would prefer to protect and restore the land than damage or degrade it. In the future, fire will change from being an adversary to an ally, a valuable management tool, and a respected force of nature. The wildland fire community will need to re-envision and rearticulate the identity of its workforce that will be more focused on ecosystem restoration than wildfire suppression, serving more as stewards than soldiers. Thus, continuing to call these workers firefighters wrongly perpetuates anti-fire attitudes and plainly misrepresents the nature of their work.

FUSEE proposes that we change the identity of crews from the explicitly anti-fire name of firefighters to the implicitly pro-fire name of fire rangers. Selling this new image and identity to the public will require designing creative logos, symbols, and slogans that communicate how fire rangers are as skilled, brave, wise, hardworking and adventurous as is the reputation of contemporary firefighters. But it will not be enough to simply change workers’ job titles. The wildland fire community needs to change its entire discourse—jettison all loaded anti-fire or militaristic terms, and consciously promote neutral/new pro-fire management terms—in order to nurture and sustain public support for fire use in ecological fire management. Ultimately, however, it will matter less the kind of language, logos, messages, and messengers we use

than the kind of actions on the ground that we implement. In that respect, fire rangers' pyroganda of the deed as torchbearers will be the most decisive element in shifting the paradigm.

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Figure 1—Examples of State-sponsored anti-fire pyroganda.



Figure 2—Pyroganda in logos: images as symbols used to create meanings and motives for action.

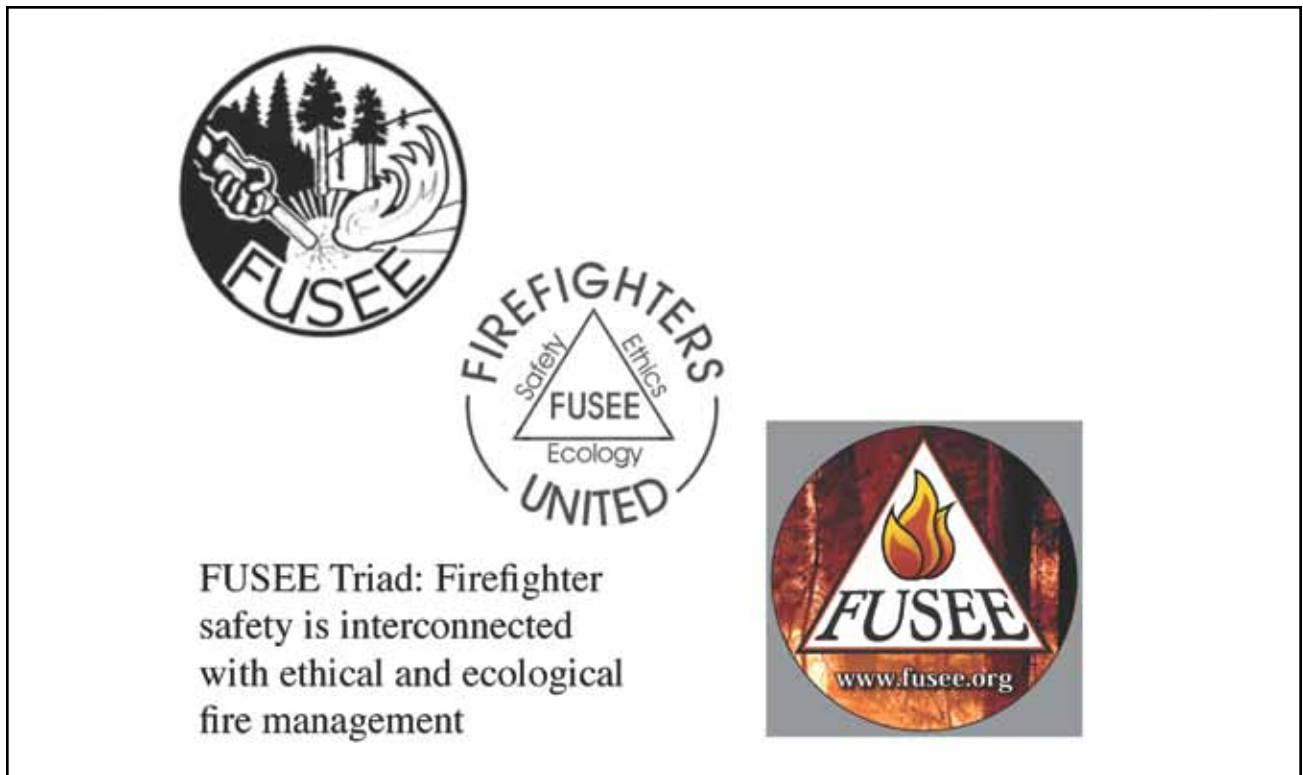


Figure 3—Examples of FUSEE graphics displaying torchbearer and the triangle symbols.