SUMMARY

Wildfires are increasingly present in populated landscapes, raising the risks to homeowners. Encouraging homeowners to mitigate wildfire risks is a cost-effective strategy for addressing these threats. As wildfire organizations and government agencies focus resources on homeowner behavior, it might be unclear how to capture homeowner attention and engage them in programs to reduce fire risk. Photos of flames and charred landscapes are commonly used in by media sources to depict wildfire. A large body of evidence supports the power of such imagery in influencing emotions, judgement and behavior. This research looks at whether such imagery could be an effective tool for wildfire programs—do photos of flames affect homeowner response to wildfire risk information and their actions to learn more? In a lab and a field experiment, we tested how homeowners in wildfire-prone areas responded to a National Geographic image of a burning house compared to a landscape photo commonly used in wildfire communication. The study found that, while the flame imagery increased negative emotions, it had no overall effect on homeowner intentions or observed behavior to learn more about personal wildfire risk.

KEY FINDINGS

- Wildfire flame imagery induced more negative and less positive emotions among homeowners than a photo of a wildfire-prone landscape.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Evidence on how to communicate risk, and whether people respond to different photos about such risk, is important to guide practitioners in designing outreach to homeowners in areas at risk from wildfire.
- Focused attention to flame imagery showing the worst-case scenario of wildfire can affect homeowner emotions but does not seem to affect the behavior of the average homeowner in a wildfire-prone city.

**STAKEHOLDERS**

Stakeholders who may find this work interesting include federal, state, and local agencies and organizations working to increase wildfire risk mitigation on private property. Results may also be relevant to those communicating information to homeowners at risk from other natural hazards (e.g., flooding, earthquakes) and climate change.