NEPA-phobia & the "Trust Gap": Impediments to rangeland resilience?

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A vicious cycle of avoidance and contentiousness

- Ecological, legal & social barriers to proactive restoration
- NEPA-phobia as an occupational hazard
- Consequences of avoiding citizen engagement: Distrust breeds discontent
- Can this patient be saved?

Proactive vs. reactive restoration

- Research projects (e.g., SageSTEP) look for thresholds & indicators of _future_ disturbance to help managers get ahead of problems _before_ they occur
- Management activities are much more likely to occur _post_-disturbance (e.g., ESR)
- Underlying issue for this talk: How can we get closer to a situation where proactive is the norm?

Barriers to proactivity

- Just too dang many fires!
- Climate change & invasive species → worsening conditions for successful establishment of natives
- Science is still limited – we need better information
  - Bottlenecks for seedling establishment (e.g., timing, seed sources)
  - How do we know next year will be the right year?
- Staffing is limited – agencies asked to do more with fewer people

Evidence:
Interviews re: climate change (2010)

- Are you seeing evidence of climate change in your area?
  - More likely to say yes with more years in same office
  - Newer mgrs typically said no, and were quite sure about it
- 30-year rolling averages showed increasing summer temperatures and annual precipitation change
- Awaiting specific guidance on climate change before adapting practices
  - Disincentives to try something new and not succeed
  - Time pressures push people toward familiar options

Barriers to proactivity: What about NEPA?
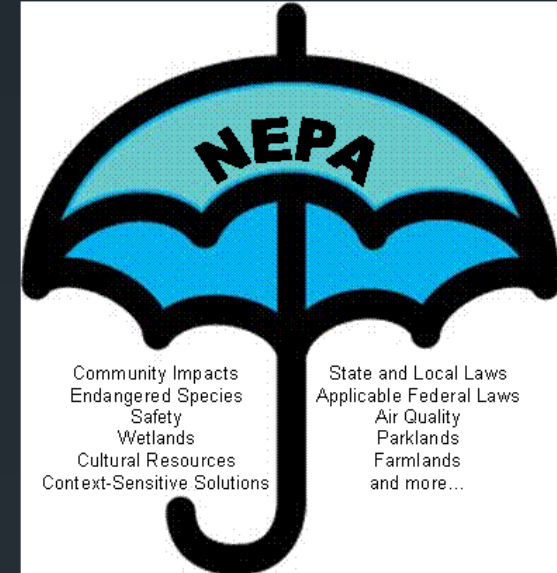
- Policy/legal process promotes delay, dispute, distraction
- NEPA requires skill at handling conflict and difficult people
- Personality disconnect
  - Natural resource professions tend to select for people who prefer outdoors to human interaction
  - Wildfire managers prefer tactical > strategic thinking
  - Culture of professional superiority?
- NEPA is time-consuming, but less so if formulaic
- Proactive projects require EAs but rehab does not

Evidence:
EA analysis, interviews, surveys

- SageSTEP interviews (2006) suggested decisions influenced by desire to reduce NEPA
- Ongoing analysis of proactive projects shows EA comments are often strategic rather than substantive
- Fire manager surveys by Wright (USFS-RMRS 2010)

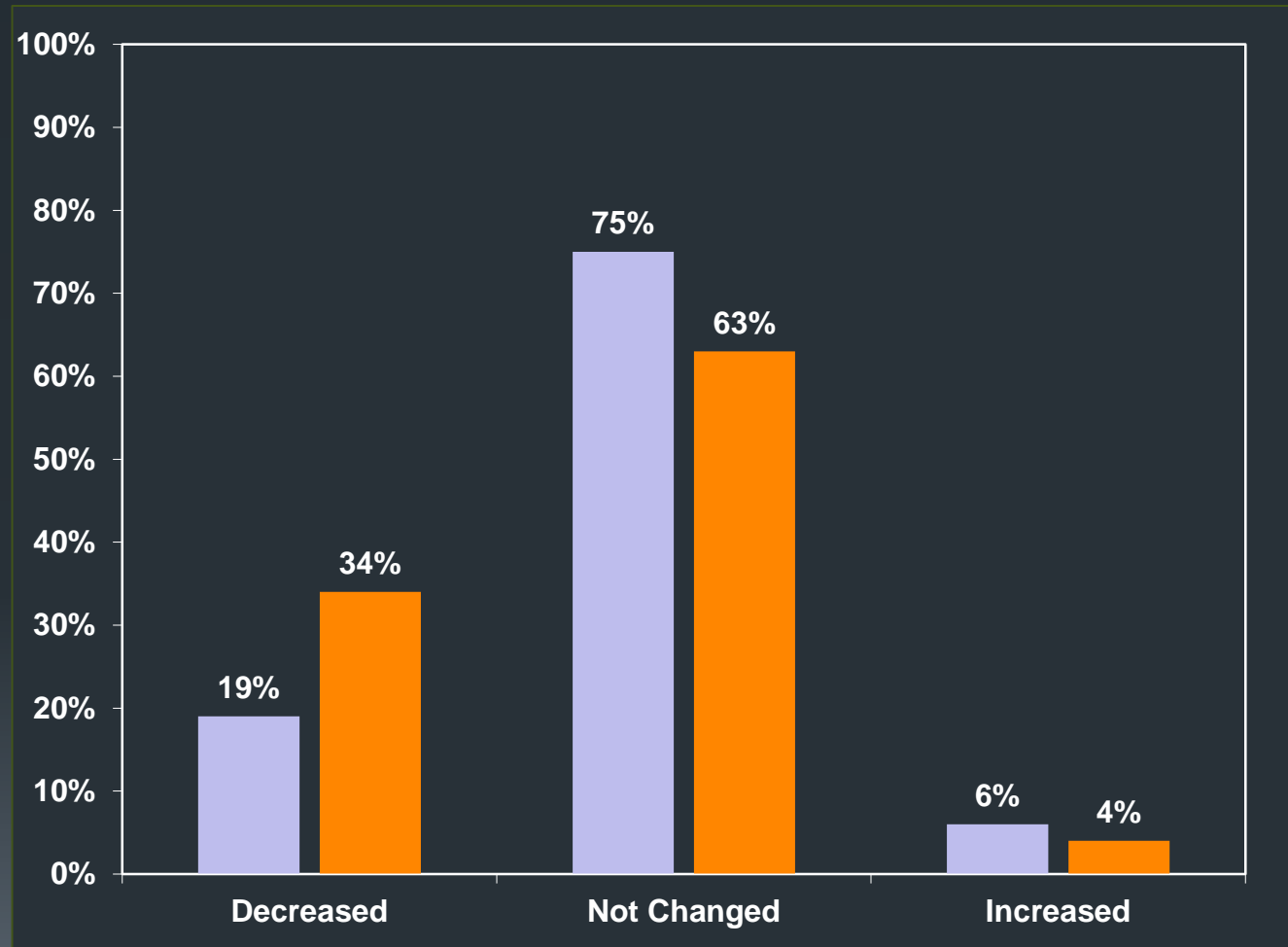# Challenges to implementing "best science"
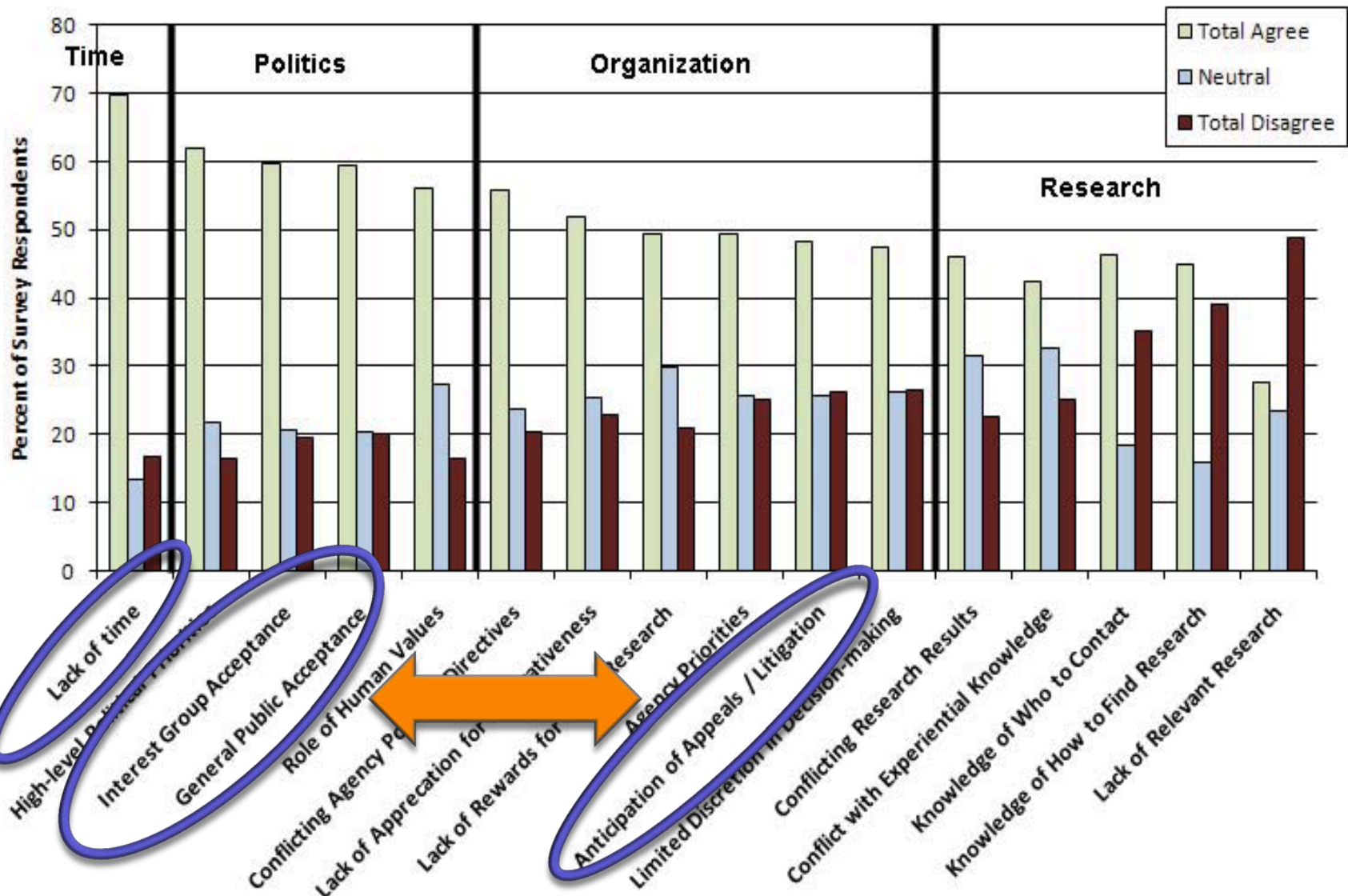
Pct. respondents to 2010 Great Basin survey who find practices acceptable to reduce fuels vs. who trust agencies to use practices safely and effectively
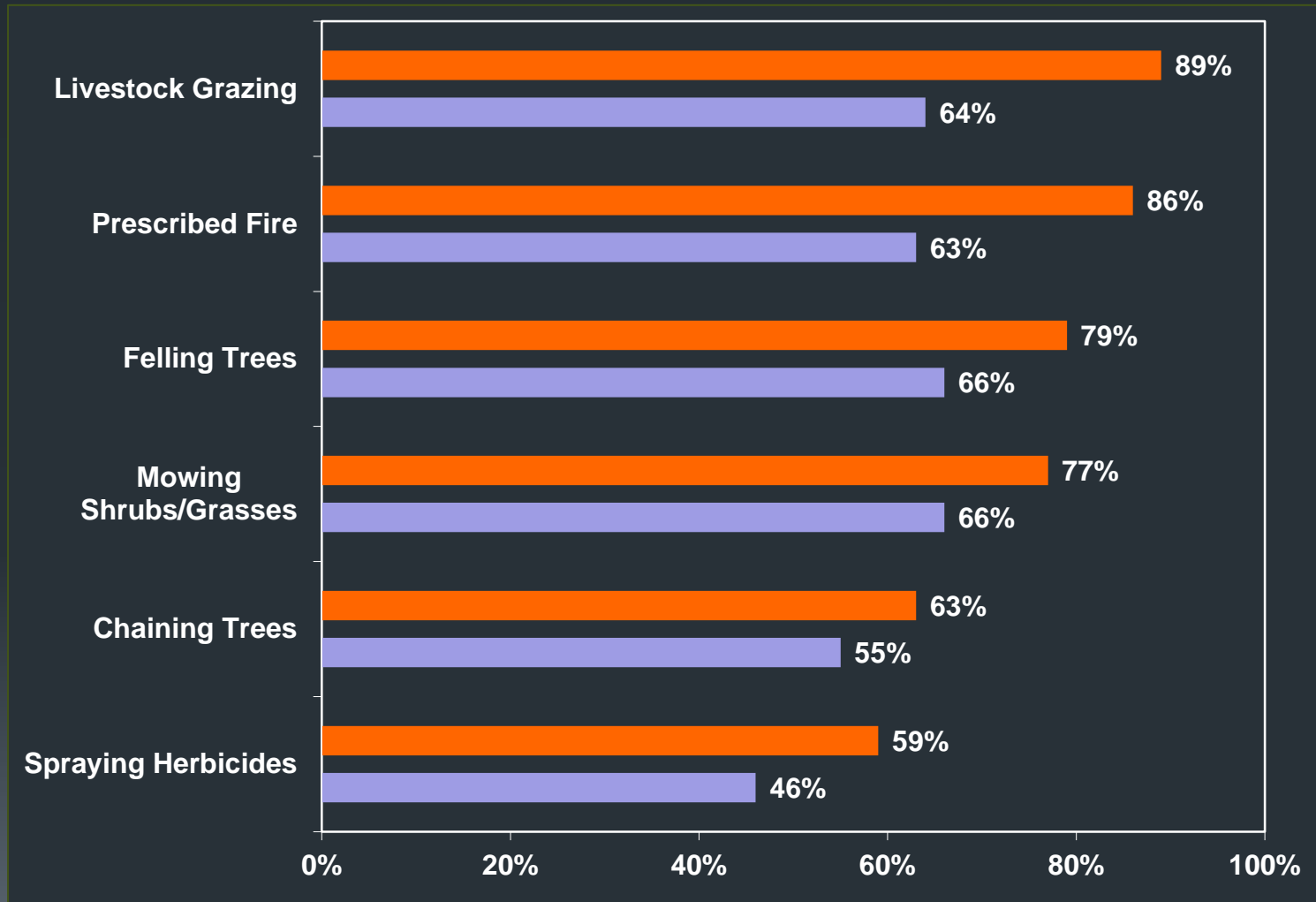
Change in responses to trust question by rural vs. urban residents between 2006 & 2010

Agreement with statements about the quality of interactions with federal agencies, 2006 vs. 2010

Statement	2006	2010
There are few opportunities for citizens to participate in agency planning	2.93	2.78
I am skeptical of information from federal agencies	2.88	2.77
Information from agencies is up-to-date and reliable	2.30	2.45
Land managers do a good job of explaining their management activities	2.30	2.40
Federal managers use public input to help make decisions	2.13	2.30
Federal managers effectively build trust and cooperation with local citizens	2.02	2.18

Choice range from 1=strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree; midpoint 2.5
Positive trend for all items significant at p<.01 level

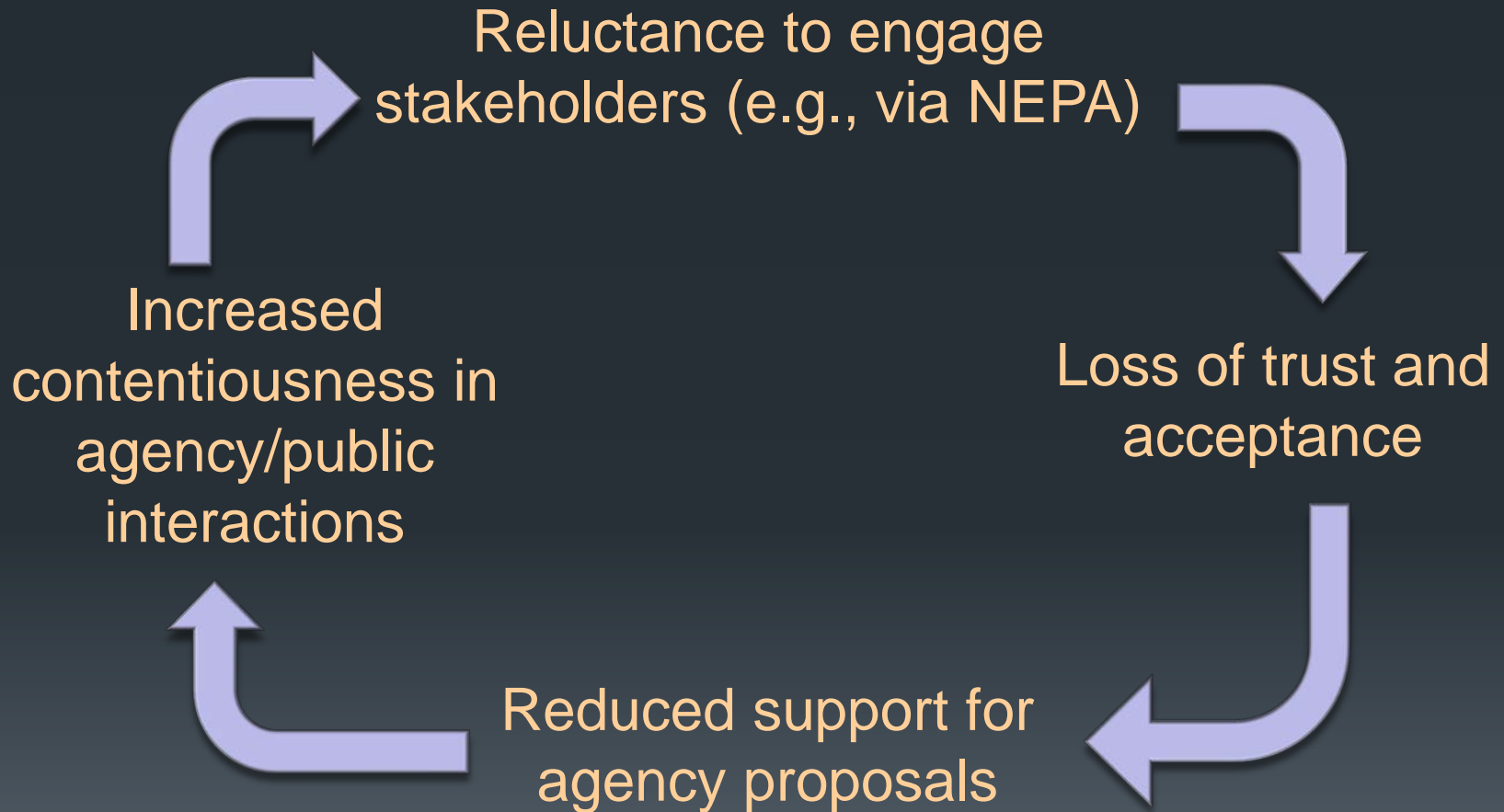## Correlations between acceptance level & hypothesized influences on acceptability

Variable	Rx fire	Mowing sagebrush	Chaining	Herbicide application
Perceived wildfire threat	-	+		
Perceived threat of invasives	+		+	
Quality of interactions index	++	+		+
Trust in agency re: practice	++	++	++	++

+/- indicates R is significant at p<.05   ++ indicates p<.001

Interaction and trust matter more than concern over threats to rangeland

The vicious cycle

Reluctance to engage stakeholders (e.g., via NEPA)

Loss of trust and acceptance

Reduced support for agency proposals

Increased contentiousness in agency/public interactions

Can we do anything about this?

- First, the good news: We _are_ doing something about it … perceptions are improving, just not fast enough
- Focus on process, not outcomes
- Resist temptation in tough times to cut the "people people" – if anything, we need more of them
  - Outreach efforts to citizens & stakeholders, not just managers
  - Seek opportunities to engage citizens in non-threatening venues (e.g., volunteer projects, community events)
  - Hire NEPA specialists for social skills > resource knowledge
- NEPA reform … yeah, I'm dreaming