



Disability Communities Defending Democracy

Plain Language Resource on Spokane Fires and Conspiracy Theories

This is a resource in plain language. **Plain language** is a way of writing that is easier to read. This resource talks about the fires in Spokane. It also talks about conspiracy theories about the fires in Spokane.

Words to Know

- **Colonialism:** when a group of people take over the land that other people live on and care for.
- **Conspiracy theories:** explanations for the world and upsetting events that are not true. Conspiracy theories usually scapegoat people.
- **Fossil fuels:** things like oil, coal, and natural gas.
- **Fuel:** things like dead leaves, dry grasses, and shrubs.
- **Greenhouse gases:** things released when burning fossil fuels.
- **Global warming:** the planet is getting warmer over time.
- **Plain language:** a way of writing that is easier to read.
- **Inclusive democracy:** a government and society where everyone:

- Is free to be who they are
- Gets a say in their government
- Gets a say in what happens in their community
- Gets to live in and enjoy their community
- **Indigenous people:** people that lived in the area before the U.S. government took over. Indigenous people still live here.
- **Inland Northwest:** a place in the northwest part of the United States. It is east of the Cascade Mountains. Spokane is the biggest city in the Inland Northwest.
- **Natural disasters:** things like earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, and wildfires
- **Scapegoat:** a person or a group of people that gets blamed for bad things happening.
- **Spokane:** the biggest city in the Inland Northwest.

Introduction

Disability Communities Defending Democracy (DCDD) is very upset about the news from the Inland Northwest and Spokane. The **Inland Northwest** is in the northwest part of the United States. It is east of the Cascade Mountains. **Spokane** is the biggest city in the Inland Northwest. Since August 1st, wildfires have hurt Spokane and surrounding counties. Thousands had to leave their homes. And fires burned down many homes. Many of these people are our friends and colleagues. We hope the weather continues to improve. And we hope the fires stop. We

are glad no one has died. And we are grateful to people who have stepped up to help.

For example:

- Firefighters
- Mutual aid groups
- Spokane Transit Authority
- Care workers helping people with disabilities get away from fires
- Local news reporters

Many people are confused. Many people are scared. Wildfires are confusing and wildfires are scary. It is scary to have to leave your home. It is scary to be stuck indoors. It is scary to wonder if you have to leave. It is scary to not know what is going to happen. Wildfires create a lot of fear.

Conspiracy Theories Hurt Everyone

People want explanations for why bad things happen. People want someone or something to blame. It takes a long time to figure out what happened with a big event like a wildfire. This can be very upsetting. It is upsetting to not have an explanation for something scary for a long time. Some people look to conspiracy theories for explanations. **Conspiracy theories** have explanations for the world and upsetting events. But, those explanations are not true. Conspiracy theories try to explain things that are confusing.

For example, some people are confused because houses burn when some trees don't burn. But, it is really easy for a house to

burn down. Houses are very dry and made of things burn very easily. Alive trees have a lot of water. If you've ever tried to start a campfire with wet wood, you know it's hard to get it to burn. Someone who believes a conspiracy might think trees not burning means it wasn't a real fire. This is not true.

Conspiracy theories usually have a scapegoat. A **scapegoat** is someone or a group of people that gets blamed for bad things happening. Scapegoats get blamed for a lot of things. Usually, a scapegoat doesn't have a lot of power. Many people already think badly about people they are told to blame for bad things happening.

It took many days for local government to have an idea of why one of the fires happened. Local government accused one person of starting one of the fires. This is the Old Trails Fire. The Old Trails Fire is the biggest of the 3 big fires hurting Spokane right now. We don't know why the other two big fires happened. Before local government said what they think happened, people spread a lot of conspiracy theories. People also scapegoated a lot of people who had nothing to do with the fires.

When something like this happens, it is important to do four things:

- Focus on making sure you are safe
- Keep listening to local government about whether you need to get out of danger
- Focus on helping people around you
- Wait for more information about why something happened

It makes sense to want answers now. Not having answers is scary. Not having answers is frustrating. But getting the right

answer takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of people with a lot of different kinds of knowledge. It takes all of those people a long time to figure it out.

Some people will say they know exactly why something like a big fire happened right after it happened. Some of those people have good intentions. Some people do not have good intentions. It is not possible for anyone to know the exact reasons right away. We all have to wait.

Some people who spread conspiracy theories think they are helping. Some people spreading conspiracy theories want to get something out of you.

They might want to:

1) Sell you something

For example, many people who spread conspiracy theories also want you to buy something from them. They will tell you something they sell will keep you safe. They will say this even though it is not true.

2) Try to get you to join their group

They might say their group has all the right answers. Or they might say their group is the only way you can be safe. This is not true.

3) Try to get you to hate someone

A lot of people who spread conspiracy theories want you to scapegoat someone. They think some kinds of people cause all the problems in the world. They want you to hate other kinds of people. They want to use things like forest fires to hate the people they hate.

Believing a conspiracy theory does not make you a bad person. Everyone makes mistakes. But, it is important to know that conspiracy theories hurt everyone. People who believe conspiracy theories are not getting good information. Good information is important in disasters. Good information helps keep you safe. People taking money from you because you are scared is also bad for you.

Conspiracy theories also hurt other people. In 2016, some people thought a pizza shop was hurting children. This was not true. But, some people thought it was true anyway. Later that year, a man showed up with a gun. He shot at the people inside the pizza shop. He thought the conspiracy theory was true. Conspiracy theories hurt people. Conspiracy theories hurt everyone.

Why Are the Fires So Bad?

Wildfires happen when the weather is hot and dry. This summer has been very hot and dry in the Inland Northwest and Spokane. There hasn't been a lot of rain. And some days have been very windy.

This means:

- Fires are bigger
- Fires spread faster
- Fires are harder for firefighters to put out

Bigger fires that spread faster put more people in danger.

Bigger fires that spread faster are harder to put out. And, it's harder to put out fires when it is hot, dry, and windy. Right now there are many fires in Spokane. There are many fires in places

other than Spokane, too. There are many fires in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Canada.

The last couple summers have been very hot. This is because of global warming. **Global warming** means that the planet is getting warmer over time. People burn fossil fuels. Some **fossil fuels** are oil, coal, and natural gas. Fossil fuels release greenhouse gases. **Greenhouse gases** help warm the planet. Some amount of greenhouse gases are good. Too much greenhouse gases warms up the world too much.

Global warming means there are more natural disasters. **Natural disasters** are things like earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, and wildfires. It also means natural disasters are worse. That's one reason why there are so many wildfires right now.

Another reason is how people managed forests in the Inland Northwest. Some forest fires are supposed to happen. These fires would burn fuel. **Fuel** can be things like dead leaves, dry grasses, and shrubs. With less fuel, the fires would not be as big and not spread as quickly. Big fires have always happened in Inland Northwest forests. But, forest fires have not always been this big.

For 100 years, the US government tried to put out all forest fires. This may sound good. But, small fires stop fires from getting too big. Before this, Indigenous people managed forests. Indigenous people in the Inland Northwest used small fires to stop big fires from happening. **Indigenous people** lived in the area before the U.S. government took over. Indigenous people still live here.

The U.S. government took over the Inland Northwest in the 1850s. The U.S. government forced Indigenous people to stop managing forests. This is part of colonialism. **Colonialism** is when a group of people take over the land that other people live

on and care for. Colonialism is not just bad for the environment. Colonialism is racist. Colonialism is bad for inclusive democracy.

Inclusive democracy is a government and society where everyone:

- Is free to be who they are
- Gets a say in their government
- Gets a say in what happens in their community
- Gets to live in and enjoy their community

Recommendations for Government

Nothing About Us Without Us

Local governments need to listen to disabled people about disaster planning. Local governments should think about how all different kinds of disabilities will affect people during a natural disaster. For example, disabled people might need help to evacuate during a forest fire. Government should tell people about natural disasters in a way that everyone can understand.

For example:

- Using image descriptions
- Interpretation into languages other than English. For example, American Sign Language.
- Using plain language

Local governments can learn how to make plain language resources. They can use these two guides for help.

- Office of the Governor: governor.wa.gov/plain-language
- The Autistic Self Advocacy Network's One Idea Per Line: autisticadvocacy.org/resources/accessibility/easyread/

People with disabilities should lead disaster planning. This saves lives. And it is important for an inclusive democracy. Local government should work with disability organizations.

For example:

- Centers for Independent Living. In Spokane, that is Disability Action Center Northeast Washington. dacnw.org/spokane-wa
- Chapters of The Arc. In Spokane, that is The Arc of Spokane. arc-spokane.org
- Self advocacy groups. In Spokane, that is People First of Spokane. peoplefirstofwashington.org
- The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies disasterstrategies.org

We should listen to Indigenous people and Indigenous governments. This includes listening to Indigenous people and governments about land management. Indigenous people should lead programs that plan how to fight fires and stop fires from happening. Colonial land management is part of the problem. Stopping the problem means undoing colonialism.

Good Government Saves Lives and Democracy

Conspiracy theories happen when people are scared. Conspiracy theories spread more when people aren't supported. Support means making sure:

- People get from unsafe places to safe places
- People can access to disability services at safe places
- People have enough food and water
- People have access to good information

Conspiracy theories can hurt people.

One example happened in Oregon in 2020. In 2020, there were a lot of bad fires in Eastern Oregon. Some people thought the fires were a conspiracy. They thought people protesters in Portland caused them. The people they blamed were part of the Black Lives Matter movement. This was not true. Black Lives Matter protesters did not start fires in Eastern Oregon.

Groups who want to get rid of inclusive democracy also believed this. They took over parts of Oregon. They used guns to do this. They blocked roads. They set up fake checkpoints. At the fake checkpoints, they stopped people from getting away from danger. They mostly did this to people of color. This conspiracy theory hurt people.

When governments do not step up to support local communities, other people step in. Sometimes, those people do good things like donate food. Sometimes, anti-democracy groups take action. This is dangerous. Anti-democracy groups hurt people. And they get power this way. This is bad for inclusive democracy. It hurts people. Local government needs to step in.

Local government needs to:

- Spread good information
- Help local communities confront anti-democracy groups

- Support vulnerable people who are most at risk of being hurt. This is both being hurt by natural disasters and being hurt by anti-democracy groups.

Additional Resources

- For people hurt by the fires:
 - Range Media: Where Wildfire Victims Can Find Resources rangemedia.co/where-wildfire-victims-can-find-resources-how-neighbors-can-help/
- Dealing with conspiracy theory resources:
 - The Arc of King County's Guarding Against Misinformation toolkit: irp.cdn-website.com/965df770/files/uploaded/Arc+of+King+County+Misinformation.pdf
- Places to find good information:
 - Range Media rangemedia.co
 - The Spokesman-Review spokesman.com/
 - The Inlander inlander.com/
 - Rawhide Press facebook.com/profile.php?id=100038548874796
- To help Indigenous nations hurt by the fires:
 - ICT News: Relief efforts for Northwest fires: ictnews.org/news/northwest-bureau/community-rallies-for-wildfire-relief-how-to-help/