BANQUET SPEECH

HONEY, I THINK I SHRUNK THE DRIP TORCH!

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ABSTRACT

Private landowners control >90% of the U.S. South's forest land. But their future fire management methodology may not be up to them. Changing demographics and social attitudes about private land ownership and fire, along with possibly well-intentioned federal air regulations, will reduce the continued role of prescribed fire—as we have known it—in the Southern forest.

keywords: fire policy, nonindustrial private forest landowners, prescribed fire, Southern forestry.

Citation: Izlar, B. 2000. Honey, I think I shrunk the drip torch! Pages 10–11 *in* W. Keith Moser and Cynthia F. Moser (eds.). Fire and forest ecology: innovative silviculture and vegetation management. Tall Timbers Fire Ecology Conference Proceedings, No. 21. Tall Timbers Research Station, Tallahassee, FL.

INTRODUCTION

What is the past, present, and future situation of the "mom and pop" tree farmer for using fire in timberland management? What are the challenges and opportunities for the practice and regulation of fire in the forest? We will see the history of fire use may not repeat itself—or very well may, depending on our time perspective. The choice may no longer be ours to make on fire by prescription in the forest, and that lack of choice may prove disastrous for those who would seek to restrict fire use.

North America has a long history of natural fires. We know people have used fire for various purposes throughout the continent's history (Wright and Bailey 1982). In the early part of this century, the 2 biggest challenges to successful Southern forest management were wildfire and piney woods rooters (Pikl 1966). We have eliminated the hogs and effectively controlled the wildfires.

Now, control of wildfire and the use of prescribed fire are being threatened. Tall Timbers Research Station in Tallahassee, Florida, pioneered the use of fire for habitat management and hazard reduction (Komarek 1977). The first industrial use of prescribed fire I have found was by the Hebard Lumber Company on the eastern edge of the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia, in the early 1930's (Izlar 1984). Since then, foresters and landowners great and small have accepted the legitimate use of fire as a forest management and wildlife management tool, and it works.

CHANGING LANDSCAPE AND OWNERSHIPS

So, where are we now? The forest landscape in the South has changed dramatically in this century. My father grew up in south Georgia in the 1910's. He remembered the woods being so open from burning and logging that you could see a white mule a mile away (D.W. Izlar, personal communication). Things are a little thicker now.

The owners of the forest landscape have changed, too. Nonindustrial private forest landowners are increasingly urban and absentee, are holding smaller areas, are going to longer timber rotations, and have multiple management objectives—not just timber management. These people are those I like to call "mom and pop tree farmers." They are more sophisticated from the standpoint of stewardship and financial management. Yet budget and time constraints force them into more extensive, less intensive management.

In the 13 southern states there are some 4.9 million private forest landowners with at least that many opinions on the best way to manage their land. Along with corporations, they own 9 out of every 10 forested acres or about 76 million hectares (187 million acres). They produce 94% of the timber (Moulton and Birch 1995).

THE SHRINKING DRIP TORCH

It is vital we learn how to reach these new forest landowners. I think we have a ways to go because it seems professional forestry schools do not stress fire as much as they did, and there is very little information available to the small landowner. Even the U.S. Forest Service's Southern Fire Laboratory has closed.

For the larger private landowners, such as the bird hunting plantations in south Georgia and north Florida, the traditional commitment to prescribed fire still seems to be there. Yet for other large owners the game has changed. Forest products corporations are capital-intensive and asset-specific. The carrying costs of a huge land base and manufacturing plants you cannot retool to make computer chips tend to focus your financial attention. Couple this with market volatility and the shareholder requirement for stable, increasing

cash flows and you have a management mind set to reduce costs any way possible.

The cost differential is ≤$25.00 per hectare ($10.00 per acre) for prescribed fire compared to ≥$175.00 per hectare ($70.00 per acre) for chemical treatment (Dubois et al. 1995). So if fire is clearly cheaper, why is it not used as much anymore? It's that holy altar of economics again. Look at the cutbacks in company fire fighting capability, intensive site preparation methods, and road patrols. These reductions are caused by many economic factors, and many of those functions are contracted out now. Still, industrial forestry's capabilities have changed.

Smoke management regulations and tort liability rule the roost. These 2 concerns alone have led to a radical change in forest management practices by all manner of forest owners. The forest products industry's answer has been to go to chemical site preparation and mid-rotation release.

The chemicals we use today are much more environmentally friendly than in the past, but they are also much more costly. Chemicals still leave us with fuel accumulation and fire hazard. Let me give a case example of a friend in south Georgia who manages 105,000 hectares (260,000 acres) in 1 block. Last year he burned every chance he could and burned 120 hectares (300 acres). He feels smoke management regulations have almost eliminated his ability to burn. This forest was once a prime prescribed fire area. Ideally, he thinks he should burn 4,000 hectares (10,000 acres) a year, and he used to do it. Now, he is forced to go to chemicals (W.M. Oettmeier, Jr., personal communication). In his area, that decision has come with an unexpected social cost because some beekeepers say the chemicals are devastating the honeybees (Atlanta Journal and Constitution 1997). A state legislator even introduced a bill to restrict the use of forest chemicals (Georgia Senate 1998).

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has also entered the picture. The government is responsible for airshed planning. So EPA, forest landowners, and others are debating a draft "wildland fire/air quality policy" to implement the newly promulgated national ambient air quality standards (NAAQS) for particulate matter and ozone (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 1997). Will our forest and wildlife management smoke emissions be equated to so many cars or smokestacks? If they are, who do you think will get the allocation? Voters do not understand fire is a natural part of an ancient ecosystem.

POLICY CHALLENGES

Here, we come to the urban interface challenge. Our country is becoming more urban, and the remaining rural areas are losing political clout to the big cities. It has already happened in Florida, and the 2000 census will dramatically alter the political landscape in many state legislatures traditionally dominated by agricultural interests. The result does not look good for managed fire in the forest.

Urban interests centered on transportation and utilities will have more political muscle. Any management constraint that makes it harder on woods burners presents problems. Even if EPA policy and regulations on air quality do not directly affect us, they will have an indirect effect on forest management. The urban emissions manager wants to figure out how to tweak an extra 1,000 cars onto the road. Guess who will be the "tweakee"?

Fire is a critical policy issue for the nonindustrial private landowner. The wolf is at the door, and he is not dressed up like Grandma anymore. We need to burn more, not less. Do we want to count the human, economic, and ecological costs of excluding fire from a fire-adapted ecosystem? We can be proactive with fire in the Southern forest ecosystem by reforming tort law to ease landowner and prescribed burner liability, setting realistic smoke and particulate matter standards, ensuring better cooperation between state forestry commissions and prescribed burn operators, requiring prescribed burner certification in all states, and rebuilding our severely degraded fire fighting capabilities to start. Or, we can wait on the big one.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Dr. L.R. Boring, director of the J.W. Jones Ecological Research Center, Newton, Georgia, and W.M. Oettmeier, Jr., president of Superior Pine Products Company, Fargo, Georgia, for their thoughts on fire policy.

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