

THE FUTURE OF PRESCRIBED FIRE: PUBLIC AWARENESS, HEALTH, AND SAFETY

Mike Long

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DR. KEVIN ROBERTSON: Now it's my great pleasure to introduce our banquet speaker tonight, Mike Long. Mike is currently the Assistant Director of the Division of State Lands for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection here in Tallahassee. Mike is probably best known among us as the Director of the Division of Forestry, from which he only recently retired. Mike spent almost 36 years with the Division, and 18 of those were as Chief of the Bureau of Forest Protection. During that time, he worked in the sometimes uncomfortable position of being both the person who promotes prescribed burning and the person who is responsible for regulating prescribed fire and to keep the public safe. So after going to the commissioners and the legislature and the governor and telling them that we need to get more burning done and need more resources to do it, he'd turn around and come to a prescribed fire council meeting and respond to people asking, "How come you won't let us burn more?"

But I can assure you that Mike has been an advocate of prescribed fire. He has had a clear, long-term vision for the future of prescribed fire. He has worked with the National Weather Service to ensure the provision of weather information that is critical for conducting safe prescribed burns and to get more burning done. He has worked with the Environmental Protection Agency to make sure that we are given fair treatment with air quality regulations. And, most recently, Mike was the visionary for the Florida and Georgia Prescribed Fire Summit that you've heard so much about and that Jim Karels reported on. And that was in large part the inspiration for the theme of this conference, so we owe that to him. Mike has been a long-term ally of Tall Timbers, and it's good to have friends in high places.

Mike and his wife, Lynn, are both natives of Pennsylvania. He started out as an officer in the army and attended Syracuse University and the New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, where he got his degree in forestry and another one in resource management. Mike is actively involved as a volunteer firefighter and emergency responder in Monticello where he lives. We are very honored to have you.

MR. LONG: Thank you, and I appreciate it. Dennis [Haddow], you about said everything I had to say, so I'll just see if I can put a little different twist on it. I appreciate the opportunity to be here with you tonight. About a year ago or so when they asked me if I would do this, I didn't know that I would be doing a different job, especially the one I'm doing. But I couldn't be here with you during most of the conference because I spent most of last week and this week trying to figure out how to save positions and how to handle budget cuts. So I missed something that's dear to me, but I think saving people's work had to take a priority in this case.

I'd like to talk a little bit about my vision for the future of prescribed burning in the nation. And to do that, let me start off with just some basic principles that I'm sure y'all know and understand, but I want to reinforce them. We all know that fire is part of our natural ecosystems, influences landscapes, and probably influences the vegetation types across those landscapes. We realize that fire has many benefits far exceeding any negative impacts on the environment. Do you all agree with that? Fire and fire intervals determine, to some extent, the vegetation types found across our entire nation. Fire probably was a good thing, did everything it wanted to do, managed the ecosystems fairly well, and then we added humans. When humans came into the picture, they began to use fire, initially, to improve their ability to survive. But over time, humans decided they needed to build permanent homes, and then they decided they wanted to live closer together, so they even built cities or towns or communities. And then there was the need to protect those cities, towns, and communities that were more or less part of the natural ecosystem at that time, and there was the understanding that maybe we can't let fire burn across the landscape anymore. People really didn't want their little towns, communities, and cities to be consumed by fire as it moved across. So land management practices were established. Fire and its effect on ecosystems were greatly misunderstood. Fire suppression became the focus, and Smokey [Bear] reigned as king. Lane [Green] never thought I would ever say that. The suppression efforts led to changes in vegetation types, fuel loads, and even changes in the components of the various ecosystems. In addition to the changes that were taking place, mostly in the West and the Northeast, the Southeast decided to make a massive change in its vegetation type, called pine plantations. And they scattered them with great vigor across the Southeast. Fuel loads were increasing everywhere.

The one glowing light was that the southern tradition of burning the woods seemed to still provide some focus on fire being a management tool. Southerners' inherent practice of using fire, even when it wasn't legal, managed to survive. And so we had fire going through the woods at various times for various reasons, not all good, not all bad, usually called incendiary or arson at that point in time, not prescribed burns, even though they were carrying out the value and doing the same thing as good prescribed burns. But as science began to look at the changing ecosystems, a few brave souls stepped up and started to look at the relationship between the landscape and fire. While not very popular at first, the idea developed that fire was an integral part of maintaining healthy ecosystems. Over time it became popular as the positive relationship between fire and ecosystems was established and better understood.

Humans, in the meantime, managed to spread more cities across the landscape, and they decided to build more in rural areas. And then to accommodate what they were doing, they decided to put in transportation systems. Instead of using rivers and streams and so on, they built roads and major highways so that they could connect the sprawling urban areas. By the time that we really began to understand fire and that we need to put fire back into the ecosystem, we also realized that man has really complicated what we need to do by adding human influences and the impacts of people on the landscape. That's a quick overview of the first hundred years of the nation and fire.

Now let's get into what I'm really here to talk about. What do I think about prescribed fire? And usually I stand up and make the comment, "It's up to you," to start off with. But I feel the future of prescribed fire looks greater to me right now than it has in a long time. And the reason I say that is the prescribed fire councils are developing across the country, and the Coalition [of Prescribed Fire Councils] is forming, and the rapid growth and expansion of champions of prescribed burning across the nation is amazing. I really think we're in a very dynamic and exciting time. We're gaining strength. We're improving and sharing scientific knowledge. This conference is an example. There are fire conferences all over now. It's hard to pick and choose which ones I can invest and go to, so I have to pick the best ones. You have to make it count as you can. We're carrying the message to the people more and more and developing political power and support, which is very critical to the future of prescribed fire. For the first time, I think we're all coming together across the nation and being proactive, rather than working in little pockets of excellence across the nation, and I look forward to that leadership moving forward.

But as it moves forward and as I look at the future and the political process and how it works, I'd like to say that most of our laws, rules, and legislation are based on science and data. How many of you believe that? Very few. Most of the laws, rules, and regulations are based on perception and emotion. Costs sometimes are mentioned. Well, costs are always mentioned. But I can guarantee you, when it comes to human lives and the impacts, emotion will win every time. So we have to look at the future politically and demographically, at our population and where we're going to go.

I spent a major portion of my career mediating between those that believe in burning and those that absolutely believe all burning should be ceased, and there are two extremes. There are pure burners, and there are pure non-burners. Both of those elements are their own worst enemy, and both of those attack very adamantly. I can tell you that the Sierra Club has an opinion, but it's not consistent nationwide. I cannot count on getting the same answers from the various conservation groups across the nation. I can tell you that the American Heart and Lung Association is very, very adamant, and it is nationwide, and it has a strong voice. The thing that is saving us from attack from the American Heart and Lung Association happens to be the fact that young kids and young women have picked up the habit of smoking again, and so they have had to turn back to putting their emphasis on smoking, so they're leaving us alone. Good, bad, I don't know. But I did look them right in the face one time, and they said, "Once we stop smoking, you're next." But thank heavens for young teenage girls.

I think that you need to look at how we go about it. I want to share some phrases with you, and I want you to think about them from your perspective in your career and your background and where you are. And then I want you think about the same statement as if you were the public or a politician hearing it. I'm going to run through a series of them. I just want you to churn through your mind what I say in each one of them.

"Prescribed fire is a major component to managing healthy ecosystems." Y'all agree? You could carry that message forward, no problem, right? It's true. It's fact. We know it to be.

"The particulate size in prescribed fire smoke is the same size as that that causes cancer and will negatively impact the citizens and health care costs of our nation." How do y'all think about that? I'm not sure. Maybe he's right, maybe he's wrong. Let's go find some science to prove it one way or the other. Well, it's been written, it's documented, and it's documented both ways, and statisticians will tell us where we go. But the public is going to believe it. The public is going to believe it. Whether it's true or false, the public will believe that.

"Prescribed fire reduces hazardous fuels and protects homes from wildfires." Good sales point. Great sales pitch.

"Headlines: 'Prescribed fire escapes and destroys seven homes.'" What happened to your sales pitch? Gone. Gone. I have to think how to say this tactfully, but one bad one undoes 50 good ones.

"Prescribed fire allows us to choose when fire is going to occur and to manage the smoke," and, "I've lived with smoke from that damn prescribed burn for four days now." Two different people, two different messages being carried forward.

"Prescribed fire improves wildlife habitat." Everybody is in favor of protecting the little animals. We all love them. They're near and dear to us. Well, the next day: "Prescribed burn responsible for respiratory problems in horses at local stable." So today you have the animal lovers on your side, and tomorrow you have the animal lovers hating you because you've taken care of a little girl's pony and then you've given it respiratory problems.

"We need to let fires burn across the landscape in a natural manner and reimburse the homeowners for their losses." Has anybody ever heard that statement for real? Has anybody ever heard anybody actually make that statement? No? That's good. I have. Maybe I was listening wrong, but I don't think so. I think I was with a bunch of fire suppression people who were trying to call on a new program called "Fire Use and Leave Fire Burn Across."

Well, the next statement is, "I lost everything I had, all my family's pictures and things from my mother and father who have passed away. They were irreplaceable, all because they let some idiot burn under these conditions." How do we sell it?

"There is a reduced amount of smoke from prescribed fire." Do we all believe that? With good prescribed burning, can we burn and have cleaner fires? Okay. The next one.

"Headlines: 'Smoke from prescribed burn responsible for smoke on highway accident killing five people.'" I'm just giving you both sides of it, just so you get it in your mind and you think about it, and that we think about everything we do. There are just a few different spins that can be placed on the

way we present prescribed burning, and how easy it is and how fragile it is on the other side of it, because it is an inherently dangerous practice, no matter how good we are.

I still think the future is bright, but I think there are many battles to be fought, and I think there is a lot of work to be done. If we're ever going to be successful at introducing the amount of prescribed burning necessary for good ecosystem health in this nation, first and foremost we have to educate. We have to educate the politicians and the public. The second most important item is we have to educate. We have to educate the public and the politicians. And third and outstanding and most important thing we have to do is we have to educate. We have to let people know what it is we're doing, why it's good, and that we're not a bunch of shade-tree people out there just doing what we want to do because it's just fun to do, and that we are professional and that we do things right. But education is the key.

It is really hard to use emotion on an informed public or an informed politician if you have given them the information and the science and the ability to tell them what's going on prior to the outcry that's going to cause them to have an emotional response. People will fall back on their knowledge. They'll fall back on what they've heard from you before, and they don't automatically follow their emotional side because they have some knowledge, and they have some background in what it is we're talking about. So we kind of can get out to them in advance, and then they kind of have an understanding. Whereas, it's very easy if they have no background and no understanding to come in and say, "Representative, there was a wreck on the interstate, and there were five people killed, and by darn, I want a bill passed, and I don't want any more prescribed burning in this state." It could happen. Maybe he's met with prescribed burners in advance and just happens to know a little bit about prescribed burning. But they listen to the emotion. They do the great political thing. They listen to what's said. They make sure the constituent is taken care of, and then they proceed forward with making contacts and talking to the people who are responsible for what's going on.

As we move forward and as we put more prescribed fire across the nation, there are going to be things like smoke incidents, there will be accidents, there will be loss of structures. And, yes, there will even be loss of life. The future of prescribed fire depends on how well we've done with public education and how we handle ourselves when one of these accidents or incidents occur. The future depends on us and many like us. These are the believers in this room, and I know the times are tight, but there are a whole lot of people on the fringe out there that need to be in this room.

Lane and I were talking about the great interchange of information and things that are going on, and I think it's important that we get as much of it as we can. But we have to be prepared to act responsibly, and we have to be prepared to take responsibility when necessary. We do pretty well at acting responsible for the most part. We don't take responsibility very well when things don't go right. It's pointing at him, him, him. In doing reviews, one of the first people to pop up who they try to shoot is the Weather Service for not giving them good information. It's not the Weather Service's responsibility. If you light the match, it's your responsibility. I don't care where you are in the nation, it's your responsibility. All they can do is give you the best

forecast estimate they can give you. It's not fact. So we need to know and understand that.

We need to understand that we need to find some alternatives to prescribed burning in some areas. Ooh, that's scary, isn't it? But I think there are areas in the country where the human population and the associated risk with prescribed fire in that area may just be too great, either politically or from a danger standpoint. That's not saying you can't do it. I know the Division of Forestry here in Florida burned 15 acres in downtown Miami and got zero complaints. But they spent a lot of time, effort, and front-end work on that and did 100 percent mop-up in order to not cause a problem. You cannot economically do that unless you have a FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] grant because of a hurricane, then you have the money to do those kinds of things.

I want to leave you by reading two emails that I received when I was state forester in Florida. They refer to a smoke-related vehicle accident that resulted in fatalities and many injuries. We issued an authorization, and that's all the Division did. We had no part in the burn until after the burn escaped, and then we helped with the control. It resulted in no changes in legislation. It resulted in many, many lawsuits that have not been settled yet. I think the Division has 28 against them, and I don't know how many the other agencies have. But the key thing is, we had an informed legislature. We had an informed fire service, and while there was finger-pointing and some bad things going on initially, it was very quickly brought under control and a very, very bad incident did not end up having a tremendously great negative impact on prescribed burning in the state. But I want to leave you with two messages I received, one of them the day of the accident and one the day after: "I live in the Polk County area, and I commute every day on that stretch of I-4. I'm certain that the smoke was a major factor in this accident, and currently DOF [Division of Forestry] and Florida Highway Patrol are stating it had nothing to do with the accident. I hope there is a thorough investigation into this matter, and if there was negligence on anyone's part, that they be charged with the appropriate crime. I also feel that the procedures for prescribed burning should be reviewed, and I think changes need to be made in the process. I know someone that attended prescribed fire training, and in my opinion, I do not think that is enough training to then just allow them the next day to be involved in a burn. I think training is inadequate, and I think some of the people that are involved in these burns may be loose cannons that just go off and do what they want without regard for safety measures in place. I feel that this area needs to be reviewed closely. I truly believe that someone is negligent in this matter and needs to be brought to justice. Four people lost their lives and many others were severely injured. Please assure me that a proper investigation will take place and justice will be served. Controller of Advent Health Care Professionals."

That one was easy to answer because we had one of the best training programs to get certified in the nation at that time, a weeklong course. A lot of folks burn without any training or without any kind of a course. So we were able to answer her questions on training and talk about training, and we could assure her very easily that we were going to do a thorough investigation, by both the Highway Patrol and an interagency team that was put together by the Division of

Forestry that had members from the Park Service and The Nature Conservancy and the Division in a group. So it was an interagency group of professionals that went down and looked at what took place and what happened.

The next one wasn't very easy to answer: "Can you advise just what you are thinking? A control burn in Polk County in the middle of the dry season next to an interstate highway with high winds on 1/8/08? Was this an attempt to create a tragedy that has unfolded and continues to unfold? Was it the plan of the Florida Division of Forestry to kill all of those that died this morning? I hope you really think about your actions in the past few days, and may God have mercy on those that made this decision. I can only pray for the families and hope that each and every one of the surviving families sues the hell out of Florida and your office. The blood of these killed rests squarely on your hands, Mike Long. You must really be proud of killing people today. A mad as hell Floridian." That came the same day as the accident, and that one I didn't know how to answer other than, kiss my grits, or something like that. I don't know. But that wouldn't have been the professional way, and that wouldn't be the responsible way.

I read those, not just for your own sake, but for you to think as managers, and for the people who manage under you to understand that if something goes wrong, all the good things that have taken place are gone. And it becomes a personal attack on you, but you can't let it become personal, even though your name is mentioned in there and it was in bold capitals and the whole bit. But these are the kinds of things that professionals who provide leadership in prescribed fire will have to deal with professionally and personally. The professional part of it is easy. There are a lot of young folks and a lot of people out there that the personal side of that really can get to. It didn't bother me near as much as it did my staff and some of the other people who read it. I should never have let my wife read it. That was a mistake. But I was pulling the email up and she happened to be there and she was looking at it, and it really bothered her to think that people would think that I was that kind of an individual. And you can't let your people take it personally, but they have to be ready to handle personal things because that's where it's

going to come. The task that lies ahead may not always be easy, but the reward of knowing that we're providing the protection of one of the best ecosystem management tools available should be well worth it.

I want to thank Tall Timbers for being the leader in prescribed burning, long before it was popular to do so, and for maintaining the momentum and leadership over the years. I rest assured they will continue to do so into the future. I really believe that we're doing better than we have in getting people to understand prescribed burning. I listened to Dennis, and I echo Dennis's statement, "The future of prescribed burning is up to us." But I think it's on a positive move right now, and I didn't always believe that, as some of these folks who know me well can tell you. We're moving forward, and I think that we've got a good start. We just have to keep the momentum going. Tight budget times are going to put a hurt on us, but that won't last forever. Those, too, will go away. So thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to be here, and I hope that all your burning is safe. The one thing I also hope for you is that it accomplishes what you planned it to do. So with that, have a great evening. I appreciate the opportunity, and thank you for putting up with me.

DR. ROBERTSON: Thank you, Mike, for that powerful message. It's been truly an honor and a privilege to have you here tonight. We appreciate all the leadership you've provided in Florida over the years in making us the state that gets the most prescribed burning done, and done in a way that's responsible and professional. We're really proud of that.

That concludes our banquet tonight. We appreciate everybody being here, and we look forward to seeing you tomorrow morning. Have a good evening.

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