

# LEAD, FOLLOW, OR GET OUT OF THE WAY!

Alan Dozier

Chief of Forest Protection, Georgia Forestry Commission

DR. KEVIN ROBERTSON: Next, it's my pleasure to introduce Alan Dozier, who is the Forest Protection Chief for the Georgia Forestry Commission, where he's responsible for Georgia's wildland fire management program. He's a graduate of the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources at the University of Georgia, and he has worked with the Georgia Forestry Commission since 1980. Alan has been involved at the national level, too, currently serving on the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's Wildland/Urban Interface Working Team. He has also gotten probably a little more national spotlight than he wanted during the wildfires of 2007, where he was in charge of the Georgia side of that suppression operation, for which he probably deserves a Medal of Honor, or at least a Purple Heart. He serves on the Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment Steering Committee, and he's been a key leader in the Georgia Prescribed Fire Council. Alan was also instrumental in the Fire Summit that we talked about a little bit earlier and has really done a tremendous job in providing a vision for the future of prescribed fire in the South. So it's my pleasure to introduce Alan Dozier.

MR. DOZIER: Thank you, sir. Good morning, everybody.

Last year I received an award from the Georgia Prescribed Fire Council, and I believe it was because I burned more acres than anybody else. It's a pleasure to be here today at this 24th Fire Ecology Conference. Thinking of the fact that this is the 24th Fire Ecology Conference makes me wonder what kinds of discussions were held at the 1st Fire Ecology Conference. Probably a little bit more important than that, I wonder what kinds of discussions are going to be held at the 30th fire ecology conference, or maybe the 50th. And if I could just go ahead and make my point right up front here, and it goes along a lot with what Dennis [Haddow] just told us: What's discussed in the future conferences is in a large extent up to you. It depends on how we approach things and how we get involved.

That's why I chose the title of my talk today to be "Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way." This is one of the many famous quotes by American Revolutionary Thomas Paine, who back about 1775 wrote the book called *Common Sense* and urged the American colonies to break free from the rule of the British, because America, he said, is in great measure the cause of all mankind. I don't know if you've read that as a challenge or not, but back in those times, that was a challenge. I would imagine that the general state of affairs was quite unsettled back in 1775 and that Thomas Paine's words of motivation put butterflies in the stomachs of a lot of folks who envisioned what was ahead and went on with the fight.

I would like for you to leave this conference this week with some butterflies in your stomach about the fight ahead to win our prescribed fire revolution. I want you to be a little bit uncomfortable, just enough to get your adrenaline flowing, like you were about to take on a real challenge. You know that feeling you get when you, you know, see a grizzly

bear or something? Your adrenaline gets a-going, and that's the way we should all feel.

So I invite you to lead, follow, or get out of the way. In my 30 years as a working forester, I've never seen the kind of momentum that we have right now in support of prescribed burning. I've never seen it this good or when we've had this many things going on. I know there will be presentations of papers here at the conference this week, and I'm proud to see more research being conducted than ever before. Dennis kind of alluded to it, and it's pertinent research. They are the kinds of things we need.

But we have a lot of other things going on right now that are adding to our momentum. We have certification for fire practitioners that's improving our on-the-ground execution of fire. We have government support in the form of burn authorization programs that help mitigate the issues and the challenges we face for our right to burn. We have prescribed fire councils. It might surprise you to learn that there are 22 prescribed fire councils across the nation. Georgia's council is stronger than I've ever seen it. We're real proud of the progress that the Georgia Prescribed Fire Council has made. We also have a Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils that is having its meeting here this week, and they're giving us consolidated power nationwide and internationally. Influence at this level causes momentum.

We have a southern public relations [PR] campaign for prescribed fire funded by a National Fire Plan grant. You'll probably hear a little bit later about "One Message, Many Voices," the PR campaign we're about to kick off.

We actually have the federal government paying us to do prescribed burning. Would you ever have imagined? We have effective stakeholder groups helping us with important projects, like state smoke management plans and rules for air quality control. We have county commissioners signing proclamations in support of prescribed fire. All but two Georgia counties now have signed proclamations in support of prescribed fire just this year.

Our governor sponsors an annual Prescribed Fire Awareness Week, highlighted by Prescribed Fire Day at the State Capitol. We have an integrated state government approach to air quality that includes the Georgia Forestry Commission, the Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Resources Division, and the Environmental Protection Division [EPD]. I think having these folks working together is just as good as it gets. As a matter of fact, our EPD director, Dr. [Carol] Couch, recently reminded us that she's an ecologist by profession. I think she felt like she needed to remind us of that, that she understood ecology.

EPA, the federal air quality folks, are listening more than ever. I'm not going to say that we're where we need to be with the EPA, but we sure are working on it. We are finally at the table, and I think our future outcome with the EPA may simply depend on the voracity of our appetite, because we're there now. We're at the table. And last but not

least, we have a strategic plan both in Georgia and Florida for prescribed burning to help lead us to the future.

As you might expect, I'd like to introduce you to the major goals of our strategic plan, and a lot of you folks already know what those major goals are, because you helped us develop the plan at the Fire Summit this past year. We'll talk about Georgia's plan. I'm sure Mr. [James] Karels will be talking about Florida's plan here in a little bit. They're very similar because we developed these plans together. Take a look at the copy on your table. When I say lead, follow, or get out of the way, I'm looking for you to find a home in this strategic plan and see where you can pitch in there and help us all out.

The very first goal in our strategic plan is to implement a focused, effective communication and education campaign. This is Georgia's top priority in our strategic plan. It includes items such as "Identify and distribute key messages to the public, showing the benefits of prescribed burning." Like I told you, we have a National Fire Plan grant. We're well on our way to begin with this communication and education campaign, not just in Georgia but most likely all across the South.

Our second goal is to manage smoke to minimize the impacts on air quality and highway traffic. One of the objectives that we have under there is to complete our centralized burn authorization system so we can see what's going on a larger scale. We plan to utilize the latest technology and, again, the research we need. We need the latest technology to utilize in our smoke management.

The third goal in our strategic plan is to increase incentives and financial assistance to land managers. Simply put, we're trying to figure out ways to pay landowners to get their prescribed burning done. And then aside from actually just paying money, like cost-share dollars to landowners to get their prescribed burning done, we're looking to convince them of the other benefits, to find other incentives, to make it faster, more friendly, and easier, whatever we can do to provide incentives to landowners to get the burning done.

Goals number four and five in our strategic plan are a lot alike. Four is to promote and implement prescribed fire operations. This mainly has a lot to do with streamlining our partnerships and putting the resources of our prescribed burning together to get more burning done on the ground.

Number five is to prioritize prescribed fire to promote and implement operations. It sounds about the same, but basically what we're after here is for each agency and each organization that's involved with prescribed fire to put more of a priority on it, to be burning when you can burn instead of off doing some of these other items.

Goal number six is to take a proactive role in growth management to mitigate the impacts of urbanization. You folks know as well as I do that urbanization is the root of a lot of the issues that we have in prescribed burning nowadays, a lot of population growth. I think Georgia is about to reach nine million people. And our main objective here is to work with the local governments. Some of the local governments want to regulate prescribed burning at the local level, and we're trying to convince them to let us do that statewide so that we don't have a lot of local regulations that have to do with prescribed burning. We also plan to get in with the urban areas that are growing, and hopefully they can

grow in a way that we can continue to manage the forest and do the prescribed burning.

And finally, the seventh of our goals in our strategic plan is to enhance the professionalism of our prescribed fire practitioners. We're going to work on a code of ethics for prescribed burning. We're going to work to try to standardize the planning and execution process just a little bit better, and we're going to work to increase the training and certification that we give. Also, we'll have some instruction with our practitioners about how to talk to the media. Things like that. So those are our seven goals in our strategic plan. We hope that you'll pitch in there and help with it some.

Folks, it would be a downright shame for us to let all this effort and the momentum that we have go to waste. Maybe a little bit like Thomas Paine, I can feel a major milestone coming up here. We have so many good things going on. We have too much momentum. We've got good plans. We're working together. There's no reason at all why something good can't come out of all of the momentum we have going.

So to steal a Thomas Paine quote, I'd like to say the cause of prescribed burning is in great measure the cause of all mankind. But that's a challenge. It's not just a quote, because, if you let me translate that into my terms, what it says is: The future of prescribed burning is up to you. Don't let us down.

So when you leave this conference, I hope you decide whether you're going to lead, follow, or get out of the way. And I hope it puts butterflies in your stomach and causes some adrenaline and you go forth with a lot of enthusiasm, because that's what we need. So thanks for your time and attention this morning.

DR. ROBERTSON: We still have time for questions if you'd like to take some now.

DR. JIM BRENNER: I have just one question. You said that you're trying to convince the local governments to allow you to handle the regulation of prescribed burning. Could you elaborate more on how you're doing that?

MR. DOZIER: Yes. We're getting them to sign those proclamations. I know Florida got that done several years ago. It's our start, to get in with the local county commissioners and make them aware of prescribed burning and to talk to them about burning. But, yes, we'll basically just keep visiting with the local county officials and letting them know who we are and that we burn and why we burn.

One of the things I would like to do, Jim, is to begin to help the county prescribed burn some of their county property. I know we started a program with the Georgia State Parks probably 15 years ago. They weren't burning the state parks at all in Georgia, and we started visiting the state parks and talking to them about prescribed burning and helping them burn. Now just about all of the parks are burning, and I'd like to see the county governments burning their property.

DR. BRENNER: Have you considered passing regulation in Georgia that would put your agency in charge of this?

MR. DOZIER: Well, we do have a law in Georgia that doesn't allow local governments to regulate prescribed fire any more than the state does, and I think between that law and using our influence and our good relationships, we can probably get there. I hope so, anyway.

MR. KENT HANBY: Alan, in your strategic plan, you didn't mention liability, and that seems to be the biggest obstruction for prescribed burning in the South. Why did you leave liability off?

MR. DOZIER: I guess I'll be a little bit flippant here and tell you. We had a group of 40 stakeholders helping us to write this plan, and all 40 of us left liability out of the plan. Hopefully, the goal number seven there, increasing the professionalism of the prescribed fire practitioners, will help us with the liability. We have a gross negligence law in Georgia where you have to prove gross negligence to make the burners liable. Do you have suggestions?

Okay. That's something we need to work on. You know, last year we had the big Okefenokee fires and a lot of that land burned and we all started talking about, well, if they had prescribed burned this property, it wouldn't be this big a problem. I think one of the reasons those folks were not prescribed burning in that part of the state is liability. So I agree with you, there are some things to address there.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Does Georgia have a noxious weed law? If so, or if not, why don't we have a noxious fuel load law?

MR. DOZIER: I would like to steer away from as many laws as we can and go for as many good relationships as we can. That's just the way I work, but I hate to pass too many more laws. I think we've got enough. More questions?

Well, I really appreciate the chance to be here. And y'all need to decide now if you're going to lead, follow, or get out of the way, because we're about to get the train going here.

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