

INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE COALITION OF PRESCRIBED FIRE COUNCILS

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WELCOME

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I would like to welcome you to our first official meeting of the Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils. I feel like I should say something pretty profound here, because I hope that we look back at this as one of those pivotal moments in time where change occurred. But I feel kind of overwhelmed and a little speechless. For those that I've worked with directly over the last couple of years, you know that I've been pretty involved with prescribed fire councils and promoting the use of fire, not only in Georgia, but taking a broader look than that. It's been quite a journey. And it's hard to believe that it was a little over two years ago that we had a stakeholder group that came together and created the coalition. So, in some respects, we have come a long way. We certainly have a long way to go. But for me personally, as well as professionally, it has really been a pleasure and a privilege to be associated with so many wonderful people.

I do need to thank some people. First and foremost, we need to thank Tall Timbers, for Lane [Green] and his participation, Ron Masters, Kevin [Robertson], for allowing us to have this meeting here today. And I think it's very appropriate that it is with the Tall Timbers Fire Ecology Conference. We need to thank the councils. You know, this all came about in pretty quick fashion. I think you'll see today we were able to bring together a number of councils here today, more than half, and I really appreciate their effort and desire to be here and to share with us what their efforts are.

I feel like I need to recognize the Jones Center, just from a personal note, as they have supported me in my position in so many ways. Everybody at Ichauway at the Jones Center recognizes the importance of fire and the significance of it on the landscape. Without fire, you know, we wouldn't have what we call Ichauway. We wouldn't be able to manage it, so it is important. And the support from Lindsay Boring, our director, for my position and my role is greatly appreciated.

In this theme of thanking and recognition, I think that it's very appropriate that we recognize some other people. Some are here with us today, and I certainly want them to stand up and be recognized. Like I said, it was November the 6th, in 2006, when we were able to put together a pretty diverse group. You know, I don't know how many participants there were, but I remember there were seven states represented, a number of prescribed fire councils, federal agencies, numerous state agencies, some NGOs were there, DOD [Department of Defense] was there, and private landowners, consultants, and universities. And we were in total agreement that we needed something that went beyond the state bounds and addressed regional and national concerns and issues about prescribed fire. So out of that core group emerged the leadership that really birthed the coalition. And

I happen to be the one up here speaking to you today on behalf of a lot of different people, but these people really provided the leadership and the direction to get this thing to where it is today. So I'd like to recognize them. Dave Brownlie with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southeastern Region Fire Ecologist, is with us today. Frank Cole is the retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife Fire Director, and he was our first interim chair of the group. Dave Frederick is a fire representative for the Southern Group of State Foresters. Lane Green, who we all know, is executive director at Tall Timbers. Kent Hanby, who is in the audience somewhere, is a retired Auburn [University] faculty member. Rhett Johnson is co-founder of the Longleaf Alliance. It was really the Longleaf Alliance board's idea and vision to create such an organization. Gary Rush, of the Southern Environmental Regional Office from DOD. Johnny Stowe, of the South Carolina Prescribed Fire Council and South Carolina Department of Natural Resources. Dale Wade, U.S. Forest Service, retired fire researcher. And myself. So this is the body that's responsible for the direction of the coalition.

Almost two years ago on November the 4th, we convened our first governing board. And the initial scoping group formally passed the torch to this new group to really develop further the coalition, and I need to recognize these members as well. Robert Bonnie, who wasn't able to join us today, is from the Environmental Defense Fund in Washington, D.C. Norm Christensen, who is a professor of ecology at Duke University. Jim Durrwachter, director of the National Fire Training Center, an interagency group here in Tallahassee. Brent Haglund, who is president of Sand County Foundation in Wisconsin. Pete Lahm, who is the air quality representative for the U.S. Forest Service, and he is also located in Washington. Mr. Keville Larson, who is with us here in the audience and has been here the entire conference, is chairman of Larson & McGowan in Mobile. Laura McCarthy is the western fire representative with TNC [The Nature Conservancy] in New Mexico, but was unable to join us here. Myself with the Jones Ecological Research Center. And Dan Smith, who is the fire director for the National Association of State Foresters out of Boise. He actually flew down here today and got here about lunchtime, so we're pleased that he could make it to our meeting.

The initial scoping group developed a strategic plan, which provided an organizational structure, so the board almost inherited a platform, a starting point. But it was a fascinating process for me, because I was part of that group, that it happened in such a short amount of time. We put a lot of time and effort into facilitator sessions where we developed a pretty comprehensive strategic plan. You've seen it, and I thought it was a good plan. That was two years ago. A lot has

changed in those two years. When we started out, we had six states, and now there are 22, so things have changed. The [EPA Air Quality] interim policy was not being revised at that time. The change is constant, and it seems like change today happens much faster, almost at warp speed, if you will. So we did change the mission statement a little bit from what it was. Our new mission is, "Promote the use of prescribed fire for public safety, resource management, and sustaining the environment." Basically, what we're trying to achieve is to establish and maintain a viable Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils that provides encouragement, education, leadership, and coordination. We hope to accomplish this by supporting development of councils and other entities that promote the use of prescribed fire, promote education about the wise use of prescribed fire, and serve as a forum for exchange of information and ideas. So that's the context and the framework of our mission. I think we've seen this already, but it's good to revisit it. We have 25 councils in 22 states, and a council in British Columbia, and we'll learn more about that.

So what are some of our priorities? We have some long-term goals, but because of the time, we won't be able to go into those. But council expansion is going to be important. We have a lot more states that we need to reach out to. I think in 2009 we'll hopefully see work in the Dakotas, New Mexico, Mexico, and possibly northern California. I'm sure I'll say it again, but I hope that one thing that the councils will leave here with today is the challenge to go back and, if you have a neighboring state, engage that state and try to work with them and encourage them to create a prescribed fire council. Probably in the next 30 days there will be a formal invitation to join, because to date there has been no formal affiliation with the coalition. It's been more of a letter of intent or support to be a part of something bigger, but there will be a formal invitation to join. And the only requirement will be a submission of the current bylaws and the charter for your council.

We're currently working on Web site development. Pete Lahm has kind of taken that under his wing. Unfortunately, it's not up and running right now, but it's "prescribedfire.net." We are in the process of applying for a 501(c)(3) charter to be a nonprofit organization. Seeking funding in 2009 will be critical. And as we all know, it's not the most ideal time with our current economy to be seeking funding, but it's a task and a chore that we have to do.

We need to define the skill sets for the CEO. We don't see this coalition being functioning at its full capacity in the

absence of a full-time position, unlike the state councils that operate from mostly or largely volunteer work. We see this as being structured a little different, so we need a CEO. We're working pretty hard already to try to connect with the new administration that's coming in. There are going to be a lot of key positions at not only the national, but also the regional levels, which we need to partner with immediately. We're working on that. We're still waiting to see what the implications of the revisions to the interim policy will be and to try to quickly interpret that information back to the states as to how it's going to impact fire management. And then lastly, just get the word out. We need to let other agencies and other entities know that the coalition exists, that we're up and running, and what we're all about.

I wanted to end with this. We thought that one of the best ways we could reach out to the councils is to have each board member act as a kind of a representative, although I'm not sure if representative is the right word, who is responsible for keeping pretty close contact with a group of individual councils. So Pete Lahm will have Virginia, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Massachusetts. Dan Smith will have South Carolina, Tennessee, Kansas, and New Hampshire. Laura McCarthy will have Washington, Texas, New York, and New Jersey. Robert Bonnie will have Arkansas, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Maryland. Brent Haglund will have Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wyoming. Keville Larson will have Alabama, Mississippi, Delaware, and New Mexico. It looks like Georgia, Illinois, British Columbia, and Maryland are stuck with me. Jim Durrwachter will have Florida, Louisiana, and Nebraska. Norm Christensen will have North Carolina, Kentucky, and Ohio. And I certainly hope that these lists of states will continue to grow, and maybe we'll even need to add additional board members in the future.

So that was about all of the update on the coalition that I wanted to provide. Really my vision for this meeting was that it be a time for the individual councils to come up and address the group and kind of share what they've been working on in the last couple of years. Or at least share about their existence, as most them have come to be just in last couple of years. So, with that, I won't delay any more.

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