

# BRITISH COLUMBIA PRESCRIBED FIRE COUNCIL

Robert Gray

Chair, Fire Ecologist, R.W. Gray Consulting, Ltd.

MR. MARK MELVIN: Our next council is British Columbia. The speaker is Bob Gray. He is proprietor of R.W. Gray Consulting, Ltd., and Bob is a very interesting young man. I met Bob for the first time in person back in November. We had had quite a bit of email correspondence through the last couple of years, at least 18 months or so, but I finally got to meet him. Actually next week we will have him at the Jones Center. And weather permitting, we'll get him strapped down to a four-wheeler and turn him loose. Well, we won't turn him loose, since I've seen some videos of fires that he's set. Anyway, we'll try to give him an introduction to the southeastern U.S. Here's Bob.

MR. GRAY: Thanks very much, Mark. I'll try to control myself next week. And thank you all very much for providing this opportunity to give you an update on what things are going on up in British Columbia. We established what's called the Rocky Mountain Trench Prescribed Fire Council about a year and a half ago, and currently there's a process underway to develop a province-wide prescribed fire council. I'm not involved in that process, but I'm still involved in the regional process. I didn't bring a PowerPoint presentation, but the Rocky Mountain Trench basically includes the Columbia River Trench west of the Rocky Mountains in British Columbia and extends down towards Flathead Lake in Montana. So our council has federal entities on both sides of the border, Parks Canada on the north side of the border and U.S. Forest Service on the U.S. side, especially the Eureka Ranger District. Provincially, there is the British Columbia Ministry of Forest and Range, and the Ministry of Environment folks, who manage both parks land and wildlife habitat lands, and they're also our regulatory group for smoke management. So under one umbrella they have land managers plus regulators, and then we have two large communities, the City of Cranbrook and the City of Kimberley. They both are actively involved in burning. I work with both of the fire departments there to establish burn programs and fuels programs. The regional district is involved, and then we have The Nature Conservancy, based in Cranbrook and having some properties in southern B.C. and on the U.S. side of the border, and The Nature Trust. We have two private entities as well. Most of the land within that area on the Canadian side is actually called crown land, so it's public land, and on the U.S. side it's federal land.

The reason behind setting up the council there was the 30 years or so of pretty good active burning in the Trench. Eureka Ranger District under George Curtis and Ron Hvizdak do a lot of burning, about five to ten thousand acres a year, which is a lot out there in that kind of terrain. And on the B.C. side of the border, they were looking at anywhere from about two to five thousand hectares a year of habitat burning and ecological restoration burning. But it became apparent there were going to be a lot of cross-border smoke issues. The Columbia Valley Trench is a deep trench. You have pretty much six- to nine-thousand-foot mountains on

both sides, so it's heavily prone to inversions. So if Eureka gets a bunch cooked off, the smoke comes up north and just sits in the valley, and then the B.C. folks can't get their burns going. And for a while there was a lot of finger-pointing and saying, "We can't get our burns in because you're filling the airshed up," and that was one of the issues.

Resource depletion has become a really big problem. There are a lot of folks who have a lot of good fire experience, and they're just getting old and they're kind of burned out and tired, and they're retiring. I turn 48 this year, and I'm getting kind of tired of it myself. So that is certainly a big issue, and then with budget cutbacks, you have to try to get more burning done with less. And you folks are all familiar with that.

Then the other thing is public education. There are a lot of folks who are moving into the Trench, and they're buying up secondary property. They're moving down into Montana as well, buying secondary properties. So we have this big demographic shift, and it becomes an annual public education challenge. And we just felt that, if we came together as a group, we could get this one message going and we could all sell it with limited budgets and limited people. So that was a large part of the impetus for setting up that council.

Some of our ongoing issues certainly include smoke, but we are working with the regulatory people starting this year. I'll be working with them to establish our air quality targets. I wrote province-wide best management practices for smoke about two and a half years ago, so that's being implemented. We're looking at adopting the RX-401 course, the smoke management course, and having some folks go through that. But one of the things that happens at that latitude is if somebody gets a column going in the middle of the Trench, and someone has a unit north of that, it basically gets blocked out. It blocks the sun out so you don't get the RH [relative humidity] you want. So the first column that goes up gets the burn done for the day and everyone else is sitting on the sidelines saying the RH won't come down. So you have to start to organize and prioritize things. It's not only the smoke management from visibility and human health, but it's about where the columns are. So we're working on organizing between the different groups.

Once again, resources. We're developing an MOU [memorandum of understanding] so we can move resources across international borders. You can only imagine what that's like going between Victoria in B.C., Ottawa in Ontario, and Washington, D.C. And, of course, U.S. folks want to come up and help out, but their passports are sitting in a vault somewhere in Washington and they can't get them out in time because Washington thinks you can actually schedule the day of a burn. But it doesn't work that way. There are some issues around capability. We're trying to educate folks so that our structural firefighters, who handle a lot of wildland fire but have never really worked well together with the wildland fire folks, can start getting coordinated. Try to