

THE FIRE SUMMIT: LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

James Karels

Director, Florida Division of Forestry

DR. KEVIN ROBERTSON: The next speaker for the Plenary Session is going to be Jim Karels. He's the Director of the Florida Division of Forestry. Jim oversees all wildland fire and land management activities within the Division. He's a 1984 graduate of the University of Minnesota with a degree in forest management. He has over 28 years of experience in wildland fire and other emergency response. He is a passionate supporter of prescribed burning and prescribed fire education, and he is a truly an innovative leader in finding new ways to get more fire on the ground in a professional manner that's going to preserve the use of prescribed fire in the future. Jim was another one of the key players in organizing the Fire Summit that we've talked about this morning, and he's really helped to give us a clear vision of where we need to go from here in the State of Florida and throughout the country. So let's welcome Jim Karels.

MR. KARELS: Thank you. And Lane [Green], Ron [Masters], thank you for the opportunity to be able to speak and present to you today at the 24th Fire Ecology Conference.

My talk today will be a little different than Alan's [Alan Dozier's], focusing not just on the plan that came from the Fire Summit, but on the Fire Summit itself, the background, what happened, and what our goals were and what our accomplishments were. I want to talk about why it was held, what went on, and what were the results.

But first, before going into the future, I want to talk a little bit about the present and the past and in Florida. Over the last 10 years, Florida has burned, on average, about two million acres a year. That includes silviculture, agriculture, and land clearing. We do administer the land clearing and agriculture as well. Silviculture is a category that includes all ecological burning, all forestry activities, and all wildland fuel-type burning across the state.

This is a graph of prescribed burned acres in Florida over the last 10 years. Florida leads the nation almost every year in prescribed burning. Oklahoma slips in there once in a while. We're not sure how good Oklahoma's data is, so we can't argue with them on that. But Mike Long and I were looking at this, and what we want in Florida, just as Alan has talked about, is proactiveness in prescribed fire. Our fire councils are stronger, better, and more active than they've ever been. I believe that's because of the active involvement of the Florida prescribed fire certification program. We have developed it and we've expanded it. We have a fantastic relationship with our DEP [Department of Environmental Protection] and our EPA people in air quality, a great program, a great amount of momentum in support of prescribed fire in the state, but there are a tremendous number of issues dealing with prescribed fire in very urbanized areas.

That's just a breakdown of silviculture and agriculture in the state. We'll talk statistics, and then we'll talk about why we came into this Fire Summit. In Florida, out of 36 million acres, about 22 million are burnable. That depends on the year. We're going into a pretty significant drought in

the Peninsula of Florida, and if that continues, by May and April, the burnable acres go up to about 28 million acres. We even burn lake bottoms with prescribed fire under drought conditions. So Florida is very versatile in that way. There are about 10 million acres of public land in this state now, between state, federal, and municipality lands. On average in Florida, probably 60 percent of that is burnable, or six million acres. Right now in the state, we're only burning two million acres total and about 40 percent of that is agriculture. On those public lands alone, if we were keeping up with a good burning regimen for land benefits and for fuel reductions, we should be burning two million acres a year. We're burning two million total, and that includes agriculture and land clearing as well. If you look at it across the state, we should be burning six million acres a year in Florida.

Now, let's talk about the present issue of two million acres burned per year. With six million acres needed to be burned, 17+ million people in Florida, nine million in Georgia, there are major impacts to our burning programs. Changing land uses, movements away from the wildlands, developments, developments, developments. Maybe we should thank God for the recession that has slowed the development down. It's a big change in land use.

Air quality regulations. Seventeen million people in Florida is why every day we work with our DEP to ensure we are doing things right in air quality.

Liability issues. We've talked about that. Liability impacts especially the private practitioners, but also the public practitioners as well. What happens when something goes wrong with your prescribed burn?

And finally, smoke management. In a state of 17+ million people, smoke management is huge. We have to think about it, and we have to think about it every day, from the time we start the burn, not just today, but tomorrow morning, the next day, and the next morning. The issue of smoke management in an urbanizing state is huge.

These were the issues that pushed us both. Mike Long and I talked about all these. We were running up against legislative concerns that we were not doing our prescribed burning right. We were running up against complaints from the practitioners that we weren't issuing enough authorizations and giving them adequate time for them to get their burning done. We were running up against air quality, against the counties and the municipalities where the smoke was impacting them, who were saying we were burning too much.

So there were issues on all sides, and we said, what can we do? How can we set a course? How can we set a path to the future? We pulled out a document that we, and a few of you in this room, had worked on four or five years ago, "A Blueprint for the Forest Resources for the Future of Florida." And it was a document in which we laid out a strategic plan for how to continue to keep forestry viable in the state of Florida, essentially in an urbanizing state. And we asked,

why can't we do something very similar in prescribed fire? Why can't we develop a plan?

We talked to Lane Green and Ron Masters and came up with the idea of holding the Fire Summit, and we decided to hold it at Tall Timbers. We talked crossing boundaries, and we said, let's get Georgia involved. We called Bob Ferris and Alan Dozier, and they were very interested, and we said let's look at how we can plan for the future of prescribed fire. So, we organized the Fire Summit.

We had a couple of purposes in planning the Fire Summit. One was to develop a vision for the future of prescribed fire in both Florida and Georgia, and to develop a strategic plan to minimize its impacts, and work towards a future of prescribed fire in both states. We set a number of goals prior to the Summit, and discussed the future of prescribed fire given the current situation in both states. We set goals to discuss media messages. Alan spoke of it, getting the word out, educating the people. We worked to define information needs, identify all issues related to the continued use of prescribed fire, determine what questions needed to be answered, and develop an acceptable future for prescribed fire. Those were our goals for this Summit.

We set that Summit for January 16th through 18th of 2008. We talked about how to do this. How do we set this program up? We couldn't have an audience of 500 people, even though ideally you would like to have everybody there, and you don't want an audience of only your peers. We didn't want just Georgia Forestry Commission and the Florida Division of Forestry in that room. So what we did is set a goal to have about 40+ participants. Ron Masters helped set it up for us, and we invited the air regulators, the EPA, the DEPs of our states. We invited the federal agencies, and the private land fire practitioners. We invited the state land managers working in burning programs. We invited the private consultants and the landowners. We picked a few individuals from each of those categories from each state, essentially 20, 22 people, and we brought them together. There was 500 years of prescribed fire experience in that group. There are a number of you in this room that sat in that Summit.

We opened the Summit with a series of prescribed fire presentations. What's new out there? What's going on? We talked about carbon issues in prescribed fire. We talked about the impacts of urbanization in the Southeast and in the nation on prescribed fire, and we looked at some of the most recent information and studies on prescribed fire, and what were the leading issues.

We discussed the desired future conditions of prescribed fire, and what they should be. We'll show those desired future conditions later. We talked about barriers to obtaining those conditions and listed them. Then, finally, we developed strategies that we could utilize and implement to overcome those barriers.

I talked about desired future conditions. This came out of that group. It was pretty interesting that the one that probably had the highest number of votes across the group was that by 2020 the public would be demanding more prescribed fire. Now that's a goal. That's something that we as a group in this room need to work towards. In some cases, in Florida, we have that. There are a few places where, by gosh, they want prescribed fire because they know the impact of wildfire. But we have to get the message out. We have to educate the public. We have to have communication. We also have to

do things together and cooperatively to get to where the public says you need to be doing more prescribed fire.

Number two is that the right to burn is protected. There are some pretty good laws in the state of Florida, and there are some pretty good laws in the state of Georgia, on protecting the right to burn. We can't let up. We have to continue that, and we have to work harder in strengthening it and making it better.

Number three, prescribed fire is recognized as protecting public health and safety. That goes back to the education component. It goes back to what Dennis [Haddow] said today, that maybe we need to talk more about air quality and the benefits of prescribed fire to public health versus just the safety of wildland fire fuel reductions.

Number four, fire is occurring on the land at appropriate intervals. This was real interesting. You had a big group in there and a mix of people. Some of them wanted the state of Florida to burn 10 million acres a year. Some of them said that's not realistic. But we have to agree on something. We couldn't come up with any figures as to how much we should burn a year or how many times we should burn, whether we should be burning every three years, four years, five years. But we decided that we want to sure that by 2020 we are able to put fire on the land as we deem appropriate.

Finally, a future generation shares an educated perspective about prescribed fire, knowing about it, and knowing the benefits. All of that knowledge goes back to number one, that they would demand that we have more fire.

We finished the Summit on the 18th, and then we came back together. We brought all the data in. Joe Michaels was the facilitator of our meetings between both states and Tall Timbers. We put a rough plan together. We listed out everything we had done in that Summit, and then we brought even a smaller group back together and said let's develop the strategic plan for each state.

I'm not going to talk about the strategic plans of Florida in as much detail as Alan did for Georgia, but I'll talk about it in general. Some of the strategies that we wanted to work on included: Air quality issues that Dennis talked about, working with EPA and Florida's DEP. Continually educating and working together on the topic of prescribed fire, its benefits, and what it does to reduce the wildfire emissions. We want to utilize new technology to better model smoke plumes and visibility. And, Dennis, that's exactly what you talked about as well. We decided that we have to come up with the best technology. We have 17, almost 18 million people in this state. We have nine million people in Georgia. And if we don't manage our smoke, we won't have a prescribed fire program. We have to manage our smoke and use the best technology to deal with the visibility issues on our highways.

The group said we need to come together on an innovative series of communication and education initiatives. Part of our plan, for Florida and Georgia, is a communication and education program. Tall Timbers is leading it for us. One of the steps that we've essentially taken since the Summit, which Alan is working on at the southeastern regional level, is to start a campaign: "One Message, Many Voices," on prescribed fire, that we'll implement with Tall Timbers, leading it across all 13 of the southeastern states.

As I said, Florida and Georgia both developed plans. I passed out Florida's plan as well. I'm not going to talk about

Florida's plan here today, but it looks somewhat similar. One of the key things is that we set goals and objectives, and we assigned those objectives to groups and agencies to accomplish. And we set dates with those. When do we want to get them done? When do we want to complete those objectives? The plan is for 2008 to 2020. We have dates, and we have committed participants. And the participants agreed that the Division of Forestry and the Georgia Forestry Commission should be in the middle of it. Air quality is at the center of our goals and objectives. Our fire councils are a critical part of it. Tall Timbers is involved.

And, finally, we decided we have to do monitoring. And I think this, as much as anything in this plan, is critical, that each year we come together, assess our progress to date, make needed amendments, and promote our accomplishments. We as a practitioner group probably aren't very good at that. We need to promote what we do right, and we need to promote it to the right people.

It's a continual process to educate the legislature, and we need to continually educate the public. Florida has almost 18 million people and every day we get—or we used to get—about 900 new people per day moving in from the North. That's slowed way down, but we want young Floridians to grow up with the prescribed fire. And we need to emphasize and talk about the benefits from the safety aspect, the land management, and the qualifications of our prescribed fire practitioners.

So that kind of covers the Fire Summit and our plans. Before closing and taking questions, I look at this plan as a great opportunity. I know that John Saddler, John Fish, and the rest will get tired of me because each year I'll be pointing to these plans and saying, what did we do, and where are we, and have we accomplished it? But we have a proven track record. Taking a similar plan with our forest resources, we accomplished a significant amount in following and tracking the plan. Now it's written. Now we have goals and objectives. I look forward to enhancing prescribed fire. I look forward to making sure we have the lead and we're burning, not two million, but three million, and maybe four million acres a year. Who knows what we can do? This plan, I think, will take us there. This plan will ensure that we have prescribed fire in 2020. Thank you. Any questions?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I've got one. After the '98 fires over in northeastern Florida, do you have anybody over there screaming for prescribed fire rather than the wildfires?

MR. KARELS: That was one of the areas that I talked about where we do have public demand for prescribed fire, the Palm Coast area, and there has been since the '98 fires. In Florida we have a number of large, old platted subdivisions. Under a law that we have, which is probably unique to the country, Florida can come in and burn on private land, if the Division of Forestry determines it's a fire hazard. We notify them ahead of time, then we burn to reduce those fuels. After '98, and '99, 2000, 2001, we had a lot of

different areas in the state saying, please come in and use the Hawkins Bill Mitigation Effort, which is what it was called.

We did a study after the '98 fires where we had done one of those burns just three months prior to those fires going through the city of Palm Coast. In the area where we did the burns, we didn't lose any homes. We had burned about 600 acres only three months before the fires, but even so we weren't able to stop the fire, it was that dry. But within that 600-acre block we were able to protect every home. They saw that, and they saw the value of it.

Yes, there are some areas where they're pushing. But it's a continual education process. You have to work with them, and you have to work with them every year, because of the influx of people and change in the populations. And people forget. It only takes one or two years after a bad incident and people have pretty much forgotten.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: With the budget times that we're entering into, do you perceive that it will be a major constraint to the ability to continue to assist, or I would call it exercise the privilege of assisting, local landowners with a burn?

MR. KARELS: Potentially, it can be. We're looking at it in the Florida Division of Forestry. Now I can't say exactly for Alan in Georgia, but from the Florida perspective, I think our fire side of the program is probably one of those areas that we will be able to protect the most from budget cuts. In the last two years, we have reemphasized the importance of fire on our own state lands and have significantly increased the number of burned acres, and that's my continued goal there, as well as in the private sector. There are some good possibilities down the road, with the economic stimulus program, where we could see some significant fiscal benefits for prescribed burning in both Florida and Georgia. So it's an interesting time. It's kind of a toss-up. My goal is to not see any drop in the burned acres in Florida. Actually, I want to see an increase.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How were private nonindustrial landowners represented in the Fire Summit?

MR. KARELS: In the Fire Summit we had practicing consultants that worked on private nonindustrial lands, and we had a couple of landowners. We had consultants from both Georgia and Florida that do the burning on the lands, and then we had the public and the private landowners, so it was a mix. But, again, it was a relatively small group, so it was hard to get everybody, about 21, 22 on each side. Thank you very much.

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