

NORTH FLORIDA AND CENTRAL FLORIDA PRESCRIBED FIRE COUNCILS

Steven Miller

Steering Committee Member, Land Management Director, St. Johns River Water Management District

MR. MARK MELVIN: We're deviating a little bit from the printed schedule. Dave Lewis, who originally agreed to give all the updates for the Florida councils, was not able to be here. So in his absence, Steve Miller with the St. Johns Water Management District has agreed to give the updates for the North Florida and Central Florida prescribed fire councils, and he's also a steering committee member for North Florida council. And Grant Steelman, who is the current chair of the South Florida Prescribed Fire Council, was able to be here. So we're kind of breaking it out into two different sections. And I tell you, after listening to Steve's presentation, if I had to choose anybody to ramp up a prescribed fire program to actually get burned acres on the ground, I'd put my money on this guy.

MR. MILLER: I like that introduction. I may take you with me. As Mark said, we have three regional prescribed fire councils in Florida. And for you folks in the West, you may not think that it's a long way to travel across the state. But when you're driving I-10 from the east to the west, you'll find it's a long way across the Panhandle. We also have a long way from the northern border to the southern tip. And we figured we'd get greater participation, especially from some of the private landowner folks that we were trying to get at, if we split it up. As far as the timeline, South Florida was the first one, and then it was North Florida, and they were quickly followed by the Central Florida Prescribed Fire Council. Then there are all the cooperators for each of the three different councils, so each of those groups and individuals may not have representation in each of the three councils. Who is involved varies a whole lot by where you are. In the South Florida council, well, I'm going to leave that to Grant. In the Central council, the private interest is primarily cattle operations. In Florida they burn a whole lot in the early spring to try and get the grass to green-up, so there are a lot of cattlemen that are represented in the Central Florida council. When you go to the North Florida council, cattlemen kind of fall off the list, and forestry comes on to the list. The Florida Forestry Association is involved on the north end, and there are consulting foresters in the North Florida Prescribed Fire Council. So depending on where you are, you have a different client base. And, you know, the best way is like in the old days if you had a barn raising, when everybody brought the tools they had. The same thing happens here.

In the North Florida council, we're blessed to have Lane [Green] and Tall Timbers actively involved. One of the reasons we haven't had to do a 501(c)(3) is Lane had the mechanism to handle whatever funding we needed to get through. And in this case, the Division of Forestry serves as the Web-base manager, and John Saddler, who is in here somewhere, serves as the contact who helps build all that. So we don't, to my knowledge, have individual Web sites. John

kind of controls it all as one and then disseminates the information again.

As far as what we do, the main thing, as Mark said, is to get the word out. That's the primary thing we do. We've done that through a couple of different brochures we have. We attend some of the Firewise local workshop kinds of things. They do one in central Florida at a neighborhood on the south side of Orlando called Wedgefield. They get all the homeowners out there, and everybody who burns in the area gets out there, and it's a really good opportunity to kind of share notes, and for the people, the residents, to put a face on what it, prescribed fire, really means.

I put these slides together pretty quick here this morning. I kind of view the councils as a switchboard. You have somebody coming in with a question. It hits the switchboard, and it goes back out to the people with the answer. So it's like one-stop shopping for information. I certainly may not have the answers to whatever the question is, but by participating in the council, I know somebody who probably has better tools to answer the question than I have.

You know, the '98 fire season was difficult for a bunch of us fire professionals. But one of the things it did was to bring prescribed fire and the prescribed fire councils into the forefront. Because when Governor Chiles put together the 1998 Wildland Fire Task Force, Lane was on the main steering committee of that task force, and a number of us were on what they called the technical advisory committee. And the prescribed fire councils had people on both, so that kind of ramped us up a degree.

We came together as a group when we were doing the county resolutions. I might be able to get you in the door to the Putnam County Commissioners' office, but they aren't going to look at me as some sort of authority on this subject. But Lane Green or Jim Stevenson or somebody else comes in after I kind of get the door open. Remember the old saying, that an expert is somebody who is a hundred miles from home and has a briefcase? That kind of thing happens. We might be the local contact, but the expert is whoever comes in and has the voice to help reinforce it. And I think that's how we got those resolutions passed. Somebody who knew the local people got the door open, and then somebody brought the briefcase and traveled a hundred miles to be the resident expert. And, again, if somebody needs a quick opinion, a quick voice for prescribed fire, the councils have established themselves as being the place to go. If they need to get a prescribed fire representative, for a county ordinance or whatever, you may not be able to pull together everybody who prescribed burns, but they sure can get hold of the person who is the acting chair of the council. So it can serve as the unified voice.

We've established Prescribed Fire Awareness Week and lots of different things. There are booths at the Capitol