

SOUTH FLORIDA PRESCRIBED FIRE COUNCIL

Grant Steelman

Chair, Wildlife Biologist, Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission

Hi, I'm Grant Steelman with the South Florida Prescribed Fire Council and I'm the current chair. I couldn't get anybody nominated for next year's chair, so I'll be next year's chair also. There are some interesting things, I think, when you look at South Florida and what we do with prescribed burning. The bulk of our ecosystems are only about 10,000 or 12,000 years old. Before that, we were underwater. So we're working on early-successional land. Most of our burning is on a two- to five-year rotation, and we're dealing with Miami and Fort Lauderdale and a population of over 9,000 people sitting real close to our back door when we're going out to do prescribed burns. If you look at where the South Florida council is, you go 60 miles in either direction east or west and you've got an ocean, and 60 to 80 miles south and you've got an ocean. So we have some real interesting weather factors that contribute to what we can and cannot do. Also, the bulk of our land, probably 90 percent of our land, has an elevation less than 40 feet above sea level, except for the Miami landfill. So if you want to set up an observation tower, the Miami landfill would be the best place to do it.

We meet twice a year. The spring meeting is usually just a steering committee meeting, which involves National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the state agencies, including the Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, Division of Forestry, and South Florida Water Management District. We also have the Florida Fire Chiefs' Association, and then TNC [The Nature Conservancy] and private entities, such as private ranchers. And then we actually have counties that do prescribed burning and have prescribed burning teams, which is pretty rare, for a county to take on burning their own land in their own county. So we are working on a memorandum of understanding similar to what North Florida and Central Florida councils have, and we're in the process of trying to get agencies to sign on to it.

Our fire education is pretty good. We have Savannas State Park which does a Fire Fest each year, and they get several hundred people coming and visiting their state park and learning about prescribed fire. Currently, Okeechobee County is doing a fire safety day, where they bring out their structural engines, but they started inviting people that do prescribed burning to bring out engines and talk to people about wildland fires. Everglades National Park and local Division of Forestry districts do burn training, including the red card courses and refresher courses. Everglades National Park has a lot of refresher courses and new courses. We also have interagency prescribed fire training on Corbett Wildlife Management Area. Corbett is an area that has a lot of pine islands, and currently the drought index is somewhere over 500, and you can go out there and you'll be lighting fire in waist-deep water. In a couple weeks we're actually going to have to go out there and convince Forestry to give us an

authorization to burn when we're standing in knee- to waist-deep water, so we have some interesting interactions.

This year our fall meeting had about 120 participants, and as Steve [Miller] mentioned, you get continuing education credits to keep your burn certification. You have to have so many within five years to keep your certification. What we found is about every five years all the cowboys show up to get their eight hours of credit. The cowboys get real nervous when they're surrounded by public agency representatives, but we're trying to get them more involved.

One of the things we may focus on this year is air quality issues. South Florida has several million acres in sugarcane. Sugarcane is not regulated by prescribed burning and falls under agricultural law, so they can burn when we cannot. And if you look across the horizon and see 15 columns of smoke coming up and you're wondering why you can't burn that day, what is that going to do when air quality issues start affecting you? Other issues are fires and exotics. My management area is only 18,000 acres, and I have 22 Category 1 exotics. Several are fire-tolerant species, like *Lygodium* or a climbing fern that's down our way. It goes up in the canopy and carries fire into the canopy as lighter fuel, which totally negates that tree from that point on. We also have a problem with development encroachment. Everybody likes those one-acre lots, Quail Run, Foxtrot Run, Deer Park. Well, there ain't a quail, deer, or a fox anywhere around them anymore, but if there's a swimming pool that gets ashes, then we get complaints about that.

We do have to focus better on fire departments. There are several fire departments that have expressed interest and issue permits for burns, a lot of pile burns, but they come out and check on you for acreage burns. They go through a separate permit process. You have to call the Division of Forestry to get your permit, and you have to call the fire department and tell them you're burning. If you don't have an up-to-date permit from them, you have to go through the permit process. It can limit the number of days you burn if you forgot that you're at three months and one day and that one day puts you out of permit. But we also need to get them more involved in prescribed burning and to understand what that is so that they're not in such a rush to come out and put it out for you.

We have county burn plans. Right now we suspect that when we get to a drought index of about 600, then our county issues a burn ban, but the Division of Forestry will still issue a burn permit for acreage burned. Last year the county had a burn ban, when you couldn't burn trash in a can, and I went out and burned a thousand acres. And there are a lot of questions about why they can do that, and we need to get the counties more involved. They are well aware of prescribed fire, but the public in the counties can't understand why we're holding a burn ban and you have a column of smoke going up.