

MISSISSIPPI PRESCRIBED FIRE COUNCIL

Russ Walsh

Chair, Wildlife Biologist, Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks

MR. MARK MELVIN: Our next speaker I feel like we should give a round of applause even before he gets up here because he got up and drove all morning from Mississippi to be here with us, and we really thank him for it. Russ Walsh is with the Mississippi Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks. He's the current chair of the Mississippi council. I've had the pleasure of working with Russ over the last 18 months or so, and he really was the spark plug in pulling together the effort to get the Mississippi council going.

MR. WALSH: This is certainly a great privilege for me, and I thank Mark and Tall Timbers and those involved for allowing us to have this opportunity today. This is also a great privilege for me to share the same platform with some of my mentors, like John Weir and Dr. Ron Masters. It's good to see them again and to be here with them.

A couple years ago I attended several meetings, and the prescribed fire councils were represented there or talked about or discussed. And I thought, you know, this is something Mississippi really needs. So we got several groups together in August of 2007. We got together and just talked about a fire council and what we needed and how we could get it going. So in November of '07, we had a larger meeting, and Mark Melvin came over and kind of guided us on the steps to take to get started and gave us some pointers on what we could do. So between that November and February of '08, we elected a 15-member steering committee out of that group. The steering committee drafted some bylaws. We also developed a Web site during that time. We developed a logo during that time. We really got some groundwork laid on what we wanted to do as a council and get going.

So from February of '08 to May of '08, we put together the first meeting, the Inaugural Meeting of the Mississippi Prescribed Fire Council. In that meeting, we had over a hundred participants, and they represented 50 different entities in Mississippi. So it was a great success, and we were very pleased with the outcome. We had a lot of positive feedback from those that were a part, and we felt like we were really going to have a strong council just by the outcome from our first meeting.

About some of our current initiatives. We are applying for nonprofit status with our group. We're missing out on a lot of funding in Mississippi because we don't have nonprofit status yet, so we voted as a council to go ahead and do that.

One of our major tasks at this point in time is restructuring our Prescribed Burn Manager Certification Course. We have two courses in Mississippi. One is in the spring and one is in the fall. And this is put on by the Mississippi State Extension Service. It costs \$400 and it's four days. By and large, the people that do attend the course are agency folks. We're missing a lot of private landowners because of the cost and because of the location and the simple logistics of it. It's just not very feasible for a lot of folks to attend this. A lot of the materials that are presented are outdated. We feel like one of the first and foremost things we need to do is to make this

more accessible to folks that really need to be putting fire on the ground. Here are some of our ideas so far. We're going to try to do a Web-based version. We're going to try to put it in county extension offices where folks can go one night a week for maybe over a month or maybe four nights a week or what have you, and that way they don't have to travel far from home and the costs will be reduced. Then once they get done with the Web-based course, there will be a day or two where they actually have to go out and put fire on the ground in order to complete the course. At this point in time, folks can go through four days, sit there all day and get some book knowledge, and then they can go out and set fires, and they really don't have any experience. So this is one thing that we really feel like is important for us to get going.

Also within that is a burn manager certification number system. We certify people now. We've been certifying people for years, and we don't know who they are or where they went or what they're doing these days. So it's more like a registered course-type system now. We want to be able to keep up with our burn managers and what's going on and be able to visit with them down the road and get information from them.

It seems that most councils are working on the county resolutions these days. We're in the process of developing a draft resolution to submit to the counties and let them tweak it if they want. Hopefully they'll sign off on them as they are.

Burn manager insurance is a big topic. We had a steering committee meeting last week. Emilie Cooper came. We're looking into what are the pitfalls that burn managers face in Mississippi, and what are some of the insurance problems that we have so that we can get those out in the open. One thing that we are doing, and we actually did last week at our steering committee meeting, is inviting insurance agents to our steering committee just to let them know what the council is about, get them in the fold, and more or less partner with them.

Developing I & E [information and education] material is a big one for us, too. We already have a Web site in place. We're currently working on brochures and T-shirts and things of that nature to mainly get our message out. We're hoping to put some accomplishments on the ground so people can see that we are serious and that we can really get things done. I think once we can get these up and running and show ourselves approved as a council, we'll move into the bigger issues. One of those is certainly going to be legislative action and getting recognized by the legislature. We have simple negligence laws right now. We certainly want to move towards a gross negligence platform, and that's certainly going to take more PR work as a council. We're going to have to bring more people into the fold to have that political clout and political knowledge. Prescribed Fire Week is something we want to get into as well. Our governor in Mississippi is very conservation oriented, being an