

SOUTH CAROLINA PRESCRIBED FIRE COUNCIL

Ernie Wiggers

Treasurer, Executive Director, Nemours Wildlife Foundation

MR. MARK MELVIN: Our last council update is South Carolina. Ernie Wiggers is with Nemours Wildlife Foundation. Ernie is the past chair and current treasurer and has been an integral part of the South Carolina council and has provided a lot of leadership.

MR. WIGGERS: Thanks, Mark. It's very nice to be here with this group. We got on board in about 2003 when Lane [Green] was gracious enough to come up and help us organize. This is our bumper sticker we've developed and it's our logo. We have all the major resource groups, including state and federal agencies, and NGOs on board as part of the executive committee. There are 16 of us. Our missions are to foster cooperation among all partners that have prescribed fire interests, to inform the public, and promote professionalism. In 2008, we took the step to become an LLC [limited liability company].

We're fortunate in the state that our current governor, who is serving his second term, is a landowner who does prescribed burning. In each of the past three years, he has been very helpful in allowing us to come in to his office and designating a week or a month as Prescribed Fire Awareness Week or Month. Last year we had it in May to tie in and promote the idea of growing-season burns. While we were there both the House and the Senate recognized the council for the work we have done. We have worked with the legislature to introduce a bill trying to get our right-to-burn language changed from "negligence" to "gross negligence." That always gets slipped into the judiciary committee where all the lawyers are and, basically, they say it's never coming out of there because they're not going to allow the word "gross negligence" in anything that might be litigated. So we have a lot of work to do. I don't know if we can ever succeed in getting it into another committee or something so it can get out and be voted on, but right now we're kind of hitting our heads against a wall on that issue.

We hold an annual meeting in the fall like most councils have said, and we just finished ours in November. We get a lot of practitioners and private landowners into these meetings. The most common feedback and questions we hear deal with liability and insurance. We try to tackle that in any way we can, but those issues seem to still be there.

One of the things we did do in conjunction with the Forestry Commission is a survey of South Carolina residents

in '07 to try to get their perceptions and what they know about both prescribed burning and wildfire. I will just go through a couple of things we found from that survey. I'm not going to bore you with the methodology. It was basically done by a reputable organization doing phone calls. You can see here where it talks about percentage of people who believe wildfires were a threat to their community, which is very high. And you know, surprisingly, three-fourths of the people see that prescribed fire can be effective in preventing these wildfires. They think it can be also beneficial to native plants, and they believe it can be beneficial to wild animals. The numbers go down on those last couple, but we're still talking about a majority of the population. Two-thirds of the citizens believe prescribed fire should be allowed in South Carolina woodlands; 76 percent are willing to tolerate smoke; 57 percent do not believe prescribed fire is as dangerous as wildfire; 57 percent believe smoke from prescribed fire is the same as smoke from wildfires. Those are some of the findings. The last item is probably the most disconcerting to me as part of the council: 83 percent have heard little or nothing about prescribed burning within the past 12 months. So we were afraid the population's knowledge base was going to be much lower than it turned out to be, and there was going to be a lot of myths and miscommunication and misinformation. It wasn't quite as bad as we thought it was going to be, but obviously the council still has a lot to do, and we hope that that 83 percent can get turned around in the next couple of years.

I know South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, and maybe some other states, are working on some common educational themes and programs. I'd like to hear where that is, and maybe y'all have already talked about that at this meeting, because we'd really like to start getting some of that educational material out, whether it's billboards or whatever else that has been produced. That's really where we want to go now.

Citation: Wiggers, E. 2010. South Carolina Prescribed Fire Council. Page 169 in K.M. Robertson, K.E.M. Galley, and R.E. Masters (eds.). Proceedings of the 24th Tall Timbers Fire Ecology Conference: The Future of Prescribed Fire: Public Awareness, Health, and Safety. Tall Timbers Research Station, Tallahassee, Florida, USA.