

INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN FOREST FOUNDATION'S PRESCRIBED FIRE INITIATIVE

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MR. MARK MELVIN: One of the things I have preached more than anything is that we are about building partnerships. And in that vein, I think we have an opportunity to bring on a new partner with prescribed fire councils. This is a newly created position. Emilie Cooper is prescribed burn manager for the American Forest Foundation, and she's very interested in working with prescribed fire councils in educating private landowners about getting more fire on the ground. So, Emilie.

MS. COOPER: Thanks, Mark. I know we are a little bit behind, so I'll try to rush through this quickly. I am from the American Forest Foundation. My position is a new position in the agency. I'll talk about my position first. I started just this past October. The American Forest Foundation has decided that prescribed fire is currently such a large issue for private forest landowners that this position would be important. Since it's a brand new position, I kind of have a clean slate. And we've found that the prescribed fire councils are going to be excellent partners to get things off and running. You already know what the problems are, so we're here to help and be like a utility player, like with the idea of the switchboard that someone else brought up. We might have the answers to some things, but not to others.

I work in a department known as Conservation Solutions. We're trying to find opportunities for landowners that engage them and excite them, whether they be through investments, cost-share funds, and things along those lines. A few of the projects we get into deal with sensitive species, such as gopher tortoise, red-cockaded woodpecker, and others. We do have a research partners group where we provide funding for graduate-level students, and I think we have two right now. We have a forest carbon working group, so we are trying to stay at the forefront of carbon sequestration and climate change. And one of our major focuses in the Conservation Solutions Department is what we call the Partnership for Southern Forests.

So we are recognizing that a lot of programs relate either directly or indirectly with fire. People are being educated more, and they're understanding that prescribed fire has benefits. They realize that they're losing habitat for their wildlife if they don't burn. So we realized there was a need for my position. We also recognized that family forest owners are underserved. Quite often they're not talked about when big decisions about forestry are made. They own a very major part of our forested lands, but often they're left out. And then there are the current threats that they are dealing with: climate change, bark beetles, infestations from native pests that never used to be a problem before. So a big part of our interest in prescribed fire is focused on the family forest landowner, and that's anywhere between ten and twenty thousand acres.

These are some of the ways we want to reach the small forest landowners, including educational brochures, and partnering and hosting field days, which we do on a regular basis. This year we currently have nine planned field days, so to incorporate fire into those field days is something that I will be doing. We want to encourage policy change. We do have a policy person on staff at this time, and we're bringing a new grassroots coordinator in, to get somebody in the local area to work on those policies and issues. And then this last one is to actively pursue partnerships that will enable me to partake in those activities. That is where you guys come in. So we thought that this idea of using the prescribed fire councils as an avenue to participate in all those things, whether they be brochures, field days, educational training programs, or wherever the need is.

So in the past couple of weeks in my job, I've been trying to make as many phone calls as I can just to get acquainted with the prescribed fire councils. I've talked to about half of them, including many of you who are currently in the audience. And as you know, we're all dealing with the same issues. So I grouped them into three main categories: education, liability, and policy. And we need to ask, is prescribed fire the low-hanging fruit? I think we've heard several times this week that it could be unless we make the decision and we make the move not to let them take that away from us. So, legislators can say, "You're not going to do prescribed fire anymore," but it's much more difficult to say, "Only people whose names start with A are allowed to drive on Tuesday" to get people to bring down those carbon emissions.

So what does AFF, the American Forest Foundation, have to offer? The first thing is that we have 90,000 landowners as members. We have a huge network that's already established, and on a regular basis we send out letters, emails, updates, invitations to field days, all those kinds of things. If you have a field day and you are going to incorporate prescribed fire, give me a call, and we can probably put something together where I send an invitation to every person who has ten to twenty thousand acres in your state and say, hey, if you want to learn more about prescribed fire, go to your local prescribed fire council meeting. Also, we can provide a link between councils. For example, I was in Mississippi last week, and they were working on putting together a list of insurance agents. So, for about a week, that's what I did. I put together a list of about 15 agents, with the help of some other people that I talked to, who referred me to other people by word of mouth. So pooling resources is one of our goals.

So I think that the idea of the coalition to bring the information together is critical, and right now is the best time to do it because everybody is searching for that resource. People know it's already out there, and they don't want to reinvent the wheel and do it again. The nonprofit status,

501(c)(3) topic has come up a lot. The American Forest Foundation has helped in this regard, similar to what Lane [Green] has done for some of the other agencies. We can house the money, apply for grants, things like that, if you don't want to go for that status. And another one of the really large benefits is that we've been around since the '40s. We have many, many existing partnerships already created. We have a major network of partners, including all of the state agencies, and others. Some of the publications that we've brought here and put out on the table are regionally based or state based. Already, in all of our handbooks, fire has a presence. Dennis Haddow said this, and I thought it was very appropriate: "The society, politics, and science control our use of fire." And, fortunately, all of us in this room could influence all three. So I do want to extend my resources to any of the councils. If I haven't talked to you already, please do contact me. I've been searching for some of you, as some

are harder to find than others. Hopefully, with Mark's help, I can aid you guys as much as I can and get more private landowners to feel more comfortable burning, and to burn more acres. So you can ask any questions at this time, though I know we're short on time.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Do you do any lobbying, or is it all grassroots?

Ms. COOPER: No direct lobbying. We know a lot of people, but we don't have lobbyists on staff.

Citation: Cooper, E. 2010. Introduction to American Forest Foundation's Prescribed Fire Initiative. Pages 172–173 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.