

DENIAL AIN'T JUST A RIVER IN EGYPT

Jim Brenner

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MR. MARK MELVIN: Our last presenter today really needs no introduction. Most of us have worked with him. We've crossed paths with him. The only thing I say about Jim is, I'm just glad he's on our side and not on the other side. He's dedicated. He's passionate. He's been a true leader and a visionary. I don't want to give away his age, but he's been in the fire business for some time. I wanted to close out today with a challenge that I like to give out every time we meet, and that is that we are going to have to change. The world is changing, and it seems to be doing it a lot faster these days, and it's hard to keep up with the change. You know, we used to have business plans that lasted five, 20 years. Can you imagine putting together a 20-year business plan in today's economy? You're just struggling to make it the next six months and then let's see what happens. So the world is changing. We have to change with it. We either have to adapt and move forward, or we're going to get left behind. And I think in many areas we as prescribed fire managers and land managers have kind of remained in our shells while the world has changed around us. And that will be one of our greatest challenges as we move forward. And the only way that we're going to get out of that is to step back and take the big-picture look and get out of the box. So here is Jim Brenner with Florida Division of Forestry.

MR. BRENNER: Denial ain't just a river in Egypt. I think sometimes we stay in that state of thinking about the way things should be as opposed to what the reality is. I just had to put this slide in here because we keep seeing scrub jays and red-cockaded woodpeckers and other kinds of Florida and fauna out there that are supposed to be fire dependent, and a lot of other birds and animals, but I'd be curious just to know how many of you know what this bird is. How many of you have seen more than one? More than I thought. This is known as an Audubon's caracara, and it's a native to Florida, and it is very fire dependent. Just looking at the bird, you can realize that by the way it's built. I was with Assistant Chief of Forest Protection Charles Manard about 10 years ago down in Okeechobee, and we were taking off from the Okeechobee airport, when we saw one right there on the runway. Charles said, "What the heck was that?" So he had never seen one either. But there are a lot of these fire-dependent species in Florida. They've been around for a lot longer than we have, and they are extremely fire dependent.

I think we all know the issue of fire and how much fire has played a role in the South. I often describe it as the sculptor that frames everything that we see out here in one way or another. Our vegetation and our landscape is either fire maintained or fire dependent. It's remarkable that many of the people who visited here, like the Europeans when they first arrived, kept commenting on the fact that fire was playing such a pivotal role in places where they did not expect it. It's green, it's wet, and it's burning. For example, we see here in this quote from de Laudonniere in 1587, "For although the meadows were at that season all greene, and

half covered over with water, nevertheless the lightning in one instant consumed above five hundred acres therewith, and burned with the ardent heate thereof all the fowles which tooke their pastime in the meadows, which thing continued for three days space."

Here is an aerial photograph from 1940 in Florida, showing a virtual wilderness. This next photo overlay of the exact same place shows these white streaks through the woods. Does anybody have an idea what these might be? They're tram lines from logging the cypress out of the Wekiwa Springs basin. The description from Rosi Mulholland reads, "The Wilson Cypress Company was absolutely methodical. Every one of these spots you see on the tram roads are loading decks and they radiate like stars and the tips of one star touch the tips of the next star. They did not miss any spot of the ground." This aerial is the same place in 1969. The undeveloped area is Wekiwa Springs State Park, an island in a sea of development, and that's their reality today.

Let's go back a little bit in time and take a look at the comments that were made about fire. Look at this quote, especially this last part: "But viewed from a forestry standpoint we believe that the total abolition of forest fire in the South would mean the annihilation of her grand lumbering pineries." Now this was probably written, you would think, around 1950, correct? It was actually written in 1869 by Mrs. Ellen Call Long from the Pat's Island area of the Ocala National Forest. A book was written about this lady's family, called *The Yearling*.

In 1940, the U.S. Forest Service and the American Forestry Association hired a psychologist, John P. Shea, to determine why southerners continue burning despite the Dixie Crusaders and all the efforts to change their minds to the contrary. Basically, he determined that the reason why southerners continue to burn is because they were so bored with their lifestyle and that this is the only excitement that they could get out of life. Here is one quote from his report: "Fire gives them distinct emotional satisfactions which they strive to explain away by pseudo-economic reasons. Their explanations that woods fires kill off snakes, boll weevil and serve other economic ends are something more than mere ignorance. They are the defensive beliefs of a disadvantaged culture group." There's an article that you can look up on the Internet titled "Our Pappies Burned the Woods." You can find this quote as well as others in that document.

We know without a doubt what the vegetation types in our area need. We've seen it and it's been documented over and over again with respect to fire. I say "need" because, if they don't get this fire frequency, they will change into something else. Unfortunately, as you have seen in this conference, although Florida is burning about two million acres, we should be burning six million. The end result is that a lot of those two million acres are the same two million acres that were burned three years ago, and were burned over

and over. There's a lot of land out there that has had 40 years of fire exclusion and where the depth of the pine needles would reach to your knees. So this kind of saw palmetto thicket is what a lot of the land managers have to deal with. The guy here in the center, although some of you may not recognize him, is in my mind one of the greatest fire ecologists in the state of Florida, Mr. Robert Dye, who used to be the manager at Myakka River State Park.

Our reality is that in 1958 the population of Florida was about 4.5 million. It's now about five times that, so we're at 18 million. Things have definitely changed. When we mix smoke with all these people, we can run into serious situations for people traveling on our roadways. And what we're finding more and more is that it's not the particles in the smoke, but it's the water coming out of the combustion process that is really causing the problems. I'm sure that you've all seen these pictures from the accident on Interstate 4, for which last Friday was the one-year anniversary. There are concerns about federal regulations, such as the ones for air quality and threatened and endangered species. You set a fire and burn down this red-cockaded woodpecker tree, then the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is going to talk to you. They may actually issue a citation, right, Jim?

JIM DURRWACHTER: Yes, sir.

MR. BRENNER: But there are, in addition to that, air quality issues. And here, currently, is the situation in Florida. You notice on this map that these 10 counties all have a level of ozone currently being monitored above the allowed 75 parts per billion. And I have assurances from the DEP's [Department of Environmental Protection's] Division of Air Quality, Larry George, that some of the things they put in place will bring these levels down by the deadline of 2010 so that we will not be in non-attainment in these counties. But look at these levels and understand that EPA was originally thinking of using 70, not 75. Had they gone with that lower level, how many counties would we have in non-attainment in addition to the ones that are in red there? This graph shows output from a particulate monitor in Leon County, Florida, May of 2007. And this is what was being picked up during the Sweat Farm Road, Big Turnaround, and Bugaboo fires. This line down here, as you can see, is the annual standard, and we kind of blew past that. This is the daily standard, and we kind of blew past it as well. This is the ozone level, and thank God it was in May, because had the fire been later, in June or July, we probably would have exceeded both the hourly and the eight-hour standard for ozone. We came fairly close in a couple of instances to the eight-hour standard but not to the one-hour. And, of course, we've heard about the regional haze issues. These are things that, as Dennis [Haddow] pointed out, we've been working on with EPA and others, as well as the RPO [regulatory policy officer] here in the Southeast, to come up with standards that will not impact the wildland fire community with respect to regional haze in the Class I areas.

Suppression versus exclusion. We need to understand that there is a time when fires are really damaging the resource and we need to put them out, while at the same time understanding that complete exclusion is something that's a result of ignorance and is stupid because, sooner or later, you're going to pay the fire tithe, as Stephen Pyne points out. It will either be paid voluntarily, or it will be extracted by force. This is a satellite-derived image of the plume from the

Bugaboo Fire on the 10th of May as it came into Florida. It's not the smoke, but the actual plume, so that's pretty scary, to say the least. These bands out here are from Tropical Storm Andrea. What actually blew the Bugaboo Fire and moved it in this direction was subsidence, or very low humidity and warmer temperatures, which hit the fire directly like a javelin, forcing it southward. Normally, large fires like this move southwest to northeast, so this is extremely unusual. But we can use a message that comes from this event. If on the 1st of May, before the Bugaboo came into Florida, you asked the public, "Is this the kind of situation you want to deal with as far as smoke is concerned, for not one day, but many days?" Here, several days later, there is so much smoke that you can just barely see Florida. These are actual plumes that the National Weather Service drew from the satellite imagery they were looking at on each day. I think this is the kind of information that we need to show to the public and say, "Is this what you want? Because we can keep this from happening with good fuels management."

One of my favorite quotes from Robert Dye is, "Fire management is 97 percent boredom and 3 percent pure terror." And I really think that is the case, at least that's been my experience. Most of the time, if you're doing things right, the situation should be very laid back and boring. If you're at the point where your blood is really pumping and you're really excited, one of two things is going on: The fire has gone very, very badly, or perhaps you need to see a psychologist.

I think this statement by Emerson, to me, says it all: "Enthusiasm is one of the most powerful engines of success. When you do a thing, do it with all your might. Put your whole soul into it. Stamp it with your own personality. Be active, be energetic, be enthusiastic and faithful and you will accomplish your objective. Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." You know, folks like Mark Melvin and Steve "The Torch" Miller, and many others, including anyone who is still here at five o'clock in the afternoon at this conference, fit into this category. Remember, nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. I think the folks in this business certainly aren't in it for financial gain, because they seem to be some of the most dedicated and enthusiastic people I've ever had the privilege to work with.

The last message that I would like to leave you with is that fire takes its character from its context. And to me this statement by Stephen Pyne really sums that up: "Fire is not some sort of ecological pixie dust that will magically transform the awful and ugly into the good and the beautiful. Messed-up forests will only yield messed-up fires. We'll have to fashion a suitable habitat for the fire regimes we desire. We'll have to weed the woods. Even so, it's not the trees that matter, it's the grass. We've a lot to do." Fire will take its context from the canvas that you put it on, and if you put it in the wrong place at the wrong time, you will not achieve the objectives you have set for yourself. The last part of Pyne's quote emphasizes that it's the understory that carries the fire in most cases, unless you happen to be Bob Gray where he's taking everything out, including the overstory canopy.

Finally, I'll leave you with this picture of the area on the Osceola National Forest that stopped the Bugaboo Fire because of very good fire management and the approval of this highly recognizable figure [Smokey Bear] here in the lower right-hand corner. My final quote, from the last part of

Robert Frost's poem here, says, "I shall be telling this with a sigh somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in the woods, and I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." You must grasp your reality and deal with what you have, not what you wish you had. Travel down that road and it will make the difference.

Citation: Brenner, J. 2010. Denial ain't just a river in Egypt. Pages 174–176 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.