

THE ROLE OF PRESCRIBED FIRE COUNCILS, PAST AND FUTURE

Mark Melvin

Conservation Management/Education Director, Joseph W. Jones Ecological Research Center at Ichauway

DR. KEVIN ROBERTSON: To start the second half of the Plenary Session this morning, I'd like to introduce Mark Melvin, who is the Conservation Management/Education Technician for the Jones Ecological Research Center in Newton, Georgia. Mark is involved in a wide array of conservation and education efforts with the general goal of promoting the use of prescribed fire.

At the Jones Center, Mark has hosted numerous hands-on education programs for prescribed fire. They have a regular stream of university courses that come through there for training through their academic associations. He also conducts a great deal of private landowner outreach, and he is involved in the various fire research programs that are going on at the Jones Center.

But most notably, Mark has played a critical role in coordinating the efforts of promoting prescribed burning among the different organizations and agencies, and he's currently the chair of the newly formed Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils, which you heard about this morning, with the aim of taking a national and an international look at what the challenges are to prescribed fire and to attack them on that level.

Mark graduated from Abraham Baldwin College in 1990 and has over 20 years of land management experience, including over a hundred thousand acres burned. There is probably nobody better qualified to talk to us about the critical role of prescribed fire councils in promoting prescribed fire. Here is Mark.

MR. MELVIN: Thank you, Kevin. I'd like to thank Lane [Green] and Kevin and Ron [Masters] for the opportunity to come and talk to you about prescribed fire councils. I also think I need to extend a thank you to Dennis [Haddow] and to Jim [Karels] and to Alan [Dozier] for all of the free publicity we got this morning about prescribed fire councils. I assure you I didn't pay them, but I probably owe them something before this conference is over.

As Kevin said, I have been involved with prescribed fire councils. Actually, the first council I joined, and am still and active member in, is the North Florida Prescribed Fire Council, back in 1990, but in the last five or six years I have become increasingly involved in fire councils. And I guess my role here today is to hopefully sell you on the idea that a lot of these challenges we meet we can overcome by collaborating together, and that prescribed fire councils are vehicles for that change.

One of the interesting things that I discovered when I began to put this talk together is there is really not any written history on prescribed fire councils to speak of. They're typically, you might say, grassroots movements and are just not very well documented. But there are certain things that we do know. We do know that they have been around for some time, even back as early as the 1960s. But these early

councils were really focused on wildfire, not unlike Firewise today. The membership was very exclusive, and they really focused on local areas, primarily on the community level. And because of that, their impacts were not very far-reaching. They had smaller geographic areas and limited partners.

In the early 1970s, things began to change. In 1973 and 1974, there were a series of large wildfires that displaced some Seminole Indian communities, and it created some problems. Some of the federal partners came together, assessed the situation, and it was deemed that the lack of prescribed fire use was really the root of the problem. One of the contributing factors was the "let-it-burn" policy of the day. So on a conference call in October of 1974, the South Florida Interagency Wildfire Council was established. In most ways it was not very different than any of the other councils that existed prior to that date, but what was significant is that this council had a strong emphasis on prescribed fire as a solution to the wildfire problems. And the membership was still pretty exclusive and just included agencies, but it was an interagency group, involving federal agencies and Florida DOF [Division of Forestry], so there was a little growing of partnerships there. So, the group came together to share ideas and develop solutions for the wildfire problems that they were experiencing.

Things really changed in September of '89. This is when the North Florida Prescribed Fire Council was created, and it was the first modern-day prescribed fire council. And the difference here was that it focused exclusively on prescribed fire, using it and promoting it, and the membership was inclusive instead of exclusive. They reached out to all the partners and tried to bring everybody together to rally around prescribed fire. So for that reason and many other reasons, Florida really has served as a role model, not only for the Southeast, but the nation as well, as being kind of pioneers in prescribed fire use.

Then after '89, between then and by early 2006, it was slow growth, but there were other states that came on. During that time there were four more in the South and two in the Great Lakes. But by 2006, there was a significant increase in interest from additional states. The councils had been around for some time and had experienced some success locally and at the state level promoting fire. Other states were interested in creating councils as well.

That led to a stakeholder group that met on November the 6th in 2006, in conjunction with the Longleaf Alliance conference in Tifton, Georgia. There were seven states, all the federal agencies, numerous state agencies, other prescribed fire councils, NGOs, private landowners, and universities there. And the consensus of the group was that we needed some type of national coalition of fire councils to band together and link their efforts to really address some of the regional and national issues that we all face, and so the

coalition was created. At that time, we had six states that had fire councils, and Florida had three. That was a start, but we certainly couldn't claim that we were a national coalition, so a big focus was on new council development.

So from that day in November of 2006 to present, we've had rapid expansion. We grew and had substantial growth. You can see from this map of the states that we've encompassed the entire Southeast, which has connected to the Midwest up to the Great Lakes and then all across the Northeast. We would make the Walmart executives happy with this kind of growth.

So where do we go from here? We have to find some way to break that Mountain and Pacific Time barrier. We have to reach out to our community out west. There are some challenges, some differences fundamentally between the East and West in fire use, but we have to find creative ways to bridge to the West.

So the blues may have been birthed in the South, but now that music is international, and so are prescribed fire councils. The concept may have been developed in the South, but the South did not create fire and there is some utility nationwide, and really beyond. I think the recent expansion in councils that we've had is testimony to that. We know there's an international need. And basically the concept is the same, to partner federal, state, and private members and rally around prescribed fire as the nexus. We all share similar missions, focused on protecting our right, and promoting the use and public understanding, of prescribed fire.

It took some time to condense this list because there are so many things that prescribed fire councils have already accomplished, but I think these are some of the more notable accomplishments. Under the policy column we have the right to burn, liability protection, legislative recognition, SMP [smoke management plan] development, burn bans, local policymakers, and burn manager certification programs. Under the education column we have prescribed fire awareness declarations, air quality regulators, message campaigns, annual meetings, state fire strategies, media events, and safety training opportunities. We've already heard this morning that Florida and Georgia have the right to burn and that other states have improved their state laws concerning prescribed fire use, and we're continuing to try and develop liability protection elsewhere as well.

I believe there are five or six states in 2009 that are introducing new legislation in this session to create prescribed fire laws or to improve their existing laws, so that work continues. One thing that I'm extremely proud of, as a member of the Georgia Prescribed Fire Council, is the effort that Alan mentioned with the county commissions. We followed Florida's lead, as they really developed the effort in the mid-'90s, and if I remember right, I think they got all but one county, I think Dade County, where Miami is, to get their county commissions to pass a resolution supporting the use of prescribed fire. So at our annual meeting in 2007, we decided that this was an issue that we would tackle. Now we have 159 counties in Georgia. This past fall, in 2008, we had secured 157 resolutions out of the 159 counties. So it was an enormous undertaking, a lot of hard work, a lot of education that went on at the county level, each and every county, because each board had to hear a presentation and understand the importance of not only prescribed fire in their community but in the state as well. So this is something that

South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi will begin to implement in 2009. Hopefully this initiative will expand even beyond that and have a regional impact.

I've been fortunate to be a part of a group that is trying to educate our state air quality people in Georgia and have had the opportunity to bring down to the chief of our Georgia EPD [Environmental Protection Division] Air Branch and some of their modeling staff to Ichauway. We gave them what I call Prescribed Fire 101 and had Heather Abrams, who was at that time Chief of the Air Branch (she has now moved on to EPA), on a four-wheeler setting fire. So that was great to see. And I think that we converted her because, at the completion of the burn, she looked across the firebreak and asked, "Didn't this side need to burn too? Can I light it too?" So I think she got the message. We also had the opportunity to bring down the EPA Region 4 Administrator and had the same type of experience, and now we have a good working relationship with EPA at the regional level. So all these things have impacts.

The annual meetings, those are very important. This is where we have technology transfer on the current topics of what's happening in the day. And this is where we come together and share ideas and collaborate.

Then there are our unmet challenges. We've made some headway, but we certainly have a long way to go. We've heard about air quality issues, and I promise you we'll hear more as this conference goes on. There's the wildland-urban interface. Our population is growing. I think in the Southeast we're experiencing that much more so than in other parts of the country. Public education and perception. We have a long way to go in that arena. Insurance and liability. That's been brought up, and I'm sure it will be brought up again. The ecological role of fire and managing these sensitive and natural areas with fire. And then the big unknown is climate change impacts. You know, we're just entering into this, and we'll have to see where that leads. But these are certainly going to be challenges that we deal with in the future.

So the need to partner could not be greater than today. There's no area in the country that's meeting their current fire needs. Not only are they not meeting their current fire needs, but there is, in most areas, an increased need for fire use. A lot of the CRP [Conservation Reserve Program] sites across the country, particularly in the prairies and in the South with the longleaf pine, require as part of the payment the use of fire, so we have an increased need. And, frankly, the issues and the challenges that we face are greater than any one agency or any one state or any one council can address. We have to come together in creative ways and partner. And I think the Coalition is one step in the right direction to be able to build some partnerships to support fire at a national level. One of the things that we might see one day is some type of national law, a right to burn, but it would take a collective effort of all the states and state councils working together. But through the Coalition, we could be a unified voice for all the states. And right now with the states that we do have, we represent a little over 12 million acres of annual prescribed fire use. So now that gives us a voice to be heard at national and regional levels.

One thing for certain is that our job is not going to get easier. The complexities of the challenges are only beginning, and they've been great so far. We're going to be required to develop new partnerships, possibly with public health, other

groups. I'm really not sure where that's going to lead us, but we need to be creative and we need to partner in a way that we've never done before. We need to increase collaboration among councils, particularly our neighboring councils, in regional efforts. There is no need for reinventing the wheel. I think that's one thing that councils do pretty well, is they look to each other for innovative and new ideas. And if you don't have a council in your neighboring state, it needs to be one of your high priorities to reach out to that state and encourage and help them to create a council.

This is one of my pet peeves and something that we collectively have to work on together. We need to create one message. We have 50 states, and each state has multiple agencies. We have multiple federal agencies. We need to sit down and hammer out one clear, concise message about prescribed fire and what it is and all rally around that. And part of that is creating some kind of public image of what a prescribed fire practitioner is, just like Smokey [Bear] says it all with wildfire protection.

If you've participated in a 2009 budget review, you know that it is a top priority to do more with less. I think this is that kind of catch-all at the end of everybody's job description now. It used to be other duties as assigned. We all have to find creative ways to do more, and fire councils and fire practitioners will have to do the same. Like Dennis said, if you're not at the table, you're on the menu. And so we really have to be at the right place at the right time and educate air quality regulators and have influence on that policy. I think fire councils are able to do that.

We need to support fire research, firefighter safety training, atmospheric models, fuels management, all areas of fire research. We need to be supporting that. And then, lastly, we need to adapt to a changing world. I think in many ways fire practitioners and fire managers have really stayed the same over the last couple of decades where the world has changed around us, and now we have to catch up. And there's going to be a little bit of challenge with that.

So in closing, since the first fire council was created in 1989, we've come a long way. We have a long way to go, but we are becoming an effective voice, and I think there's a concerted effort now. Because of the importance of the work that we're doing now at the national level, I know from my discussions with people across the country, that some of the leading conservationists in the country say that the future of prescribed fire depends on the efforts of prescribed fire councils and the Coalition. So we need to stay tuned, and stay informed. As the first step in doing that, I encourage you to come on Wednesday afternoon to our first meeting of the Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils. We have a nice collection of state and provincial councils, so you can come and learn firsthand what the fire councils are doing in different

parts of the country and learn more about the Coalition. How far will we have come if we can get Smokey to drag a drip torch? Thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Who actually undertook the task of contacting the county commissioners?

MR. MELVIN: I can't speak for Florida. It was a concerted effort in Georgia. It was an effort that absolutely could not have been done without the Georgia Forestry Commission. They were a big part of that process, and I would be scared to guess for what percentage of the counties the Commission actually acquired that resolution. Part of it is that, in Georgia, each chief ranger for the county reports annually to the county commission and gives them a report of their activities through the year, including how many miles of firebreak, how many responses they had, the wildfires, the acreage, so that presented a good opportunity. In our resolution—and anybody that is interested in it, I can provide you a copy of it—not only is there support for prescribed fire, but about half of that document addresses supporting the mission and the efforts of the Georgia Forestry Commission. So it was just a good opportunity. We have also had the DNR [Department of Natural Resources] board members and the state Association of County Commissioners pass resolutions. That kind of gave us the leverage to then go then at the county level. We have gotten every conceivable person or group to pass a resolution in the State of Georgia that we could, and most recently is the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. All of this carries a lot of weight at our Prescribed Fire Awareness Week, where we can present this to the Governor and his office when he signs proclamations, so we have a pretty strong showing that Georgia supports the use of prescribed fire.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Mark, it might be worth mentioning that there's no direct funding, as far as I know, of any of the prescribed fire councils or the Coalition.

MR. MELVIN: That's correct. The comment was there's no funding, and that's true. Most all the work is done strictly on a voluntary basis. Most of the councils don't have any kind of 501(c)(3) nonprofit designation. It's just a group of people that come together and support the use of fire. So it's people just like you sitting here in the room that come together and try to be a voice for prescribed fire. But we would take some money. We're not opposed to it. We could get more done. Thank you.

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