

Burning Assistance and Rural Fire Protection Programs

H. K. MIKELL, FIRE CONTROL DIRECTOR

Florida Forest Service

THE majority of the commercial forest land area in Florida consists of the coastal plain type—longleaf-slash pine type; wiregrass (*Aristida* sp.); gallberry (*Ilex glabra*); palmetto (*Serenoa repens*); titi (*Cyrilla* sp.); interspersed with swamps and bayheads. These fuels rapidly reproduce themselves after fires, are flammable most of the year, and fires move very rapidly in them under certain conditions.

In the coastal plain type, the principal fire suppression equipment is the crawler tractor-plow unit. Tractor-plow units vary in size, depending upon the terrain—smaller for light soil and light fuel areas, to larger for the lower, heavier fuel areas.

We have a continuing development program to come up with more adaptable equipment for specific purposes, for example, the aerial tanker, bombardier, and nodwell.

PRESCRIBED BURNING

Now armed with this background information, we can get to one principal topic of our discussion—prescribed burning. Prescribed burning, with its related problems, is recognized as a tool in forest

and wildlife management in the South. It is recommended and encouraged by the Florida Forest Service. We publish information on procedures to follow in a prescribed or "controlled" burn, and our foresters and fire control supervisors advise landowners on methods to follow. Our personnel receive regular training on the subject of controlled burning along with the closely related topics of fire behavior and fire weather.

Incidentally, we refer to this as "controlled burning," a term less technical, but more easily understood by the general public.

If the landowner does not have the necessary equipment to plow presuppression lines, or lines in connection with controlled burning, we will do this for him for a very nominal charge. Our crews and equipment also stand-by and assist the landowner with the burning job. But the landowner must understand that the equipment can be called to a wildfire, if necessary, so he must be careful not to fire more area than he can handle with his own facilities, should the crew be called away.

Most of our discussion concerning controlled burning assistance relates, as you would assume, to the small, individual landowners. Normally, the large owners have the manpower and equipment to do their own burning.

Our pilots, flying regular air patrols, help by keeping these areas under surveillance. Through radio communications, they can warn the landowner of developing hot spots, and if there is a possibility of the fire jumping the lines.

We also receive and distribute specialized weather forecasts, along with fire danger measurements. Certainly, this technical data should play a big role in planning any controlled burning operation. Forecasts are also available at intervals on TV and radio.

Now—as far as acreage is concerned—this type of burning accounts for the biggest part of the job.

But this isn't where our biggest problem lies.

You all know that the tremendous population growth Florida has experienced in the past few years. Suburbia has just been bursting out all over and way ahead of any type of organized protection.

These urbanized areas have presented the main problem so far as numbers of burning assistance requests are concerned.



FIG. 1. Florida Forest Service helps volunteer departments obtain heavy equipment, fire-fighting tools and accessories. In addition, training courses are conducted by FFS for benefit of the volunteers. Many of the nearly 300 active departments take "on-the-spot" training—staged and conducted under field conditions.

We need to provide for an organized burning program for these areas. So we started by accepting a simple, basic fact: for one reason or another, these people are going to start a lot of fires—burning a pile of trash, or a pile of brush, or clearing off a plot of land.

And a lot of those fires are—inevitably—going to break loose and turn into full-blown wildfires.

Working from this point, we adopted a program which we felt would help to cope with the problem. We recognized that, in most instances, these people would go to very little trouble and no expense to accomplish this burning. Our crews have reported the same old story time and again. When they would check a fire, it would be

H. K. MIKELL

perfectly obvious that it was set by the landowner although he would disclaim any responsibility for it.

The program we devised involves complimentary or free fire-lines and assistance with the burning. Fifteen minutes of plowing is allowed each year to the landowner under this plan. Depending on terrain and area involved, this will allow for plowing an area up to 20-25 acres in size, although most are much smaller. This gets the landowner off to a good start on his burning plan and if additional lines are needed, they will be plowed for a small charge.

We know this has been a very successful program for, aside from performing a helpful service to the people of Florida, it has greatly strengthened our fire prevention efforts.

This brings us back to the point mentioned earlier—that the wild-fire problem stems from people. For example, if we could eliminate all but lightning-caused fires in Florida, we would have had only 584 wildfires last year instead of more than 7,400.

Since people cause fires, it logically follows that the fire problem is concentrated near the urban areas. And the fire protection problem is further complicated with the rapid movement of people into the less developed areas.

We recognized that in many of these communities the people were counting on us for protection. And we didn't have the capabilities to meet this need. Although we aren't equipped for structural fire suppression, we do save many rural buildings and improvements. But we also recognized that these people were willing to help themselves. What they badly needed was technical assistance in organization and training, plus some equipment to work with.

This activity is referred to as our Rural Fire Defense program.

This program started about 6 years ago, but it didn't really get in full sway until April of 1964. We were selected at that time as one of five pilot states to try a new civil defense program designed to improve protection in these areas.

The Federal assistance gave us the boost needed to initiate this worthwhile effort. Federal funds were available through the next 2½ years and by that time the momentum was such we were able to carry through with our regular organization. Our people have

been enthusiastic about this program. They have seen the many benefits derived from it.

ORGANIZING, TRAINING, AND EQUIPPING FOR RURAL FIRE DEFENSE

If there is no organized group in a community, our people work to develop an interest through community leaders or civic groups. We advise them of the legal requirements and at the same time make a careful study to determine what type of equipment would be best for that area.

A training program is then scheduled taking into account the fact that most of the people have regular jobs, and their time is limited. The Rural Fire Defense course covers 8 hours of instruction. The best working arrangement is one 2-hour session, one night each week.

The subject matter includes: nomenclature of a fire, map reading, and legal land description, hand tools. They are easily demonstrated in the classroom, and some useful tools can be located in every rural home or farm; weather effects on a fire, backfiring techniques, and brush fire tactics.

We also offer some selective subjects. Some popular ones are emergency operation of crawler tractors, advanced weather science, legal aspects of fires and fire suppression, local preplanning, and radio procedure.

This training business works both ways. The volunteer fire departments receive brush fire training from us and our fire fighters receive a 15-hour course in structural fire tactics. This training session is made available by the Florida State Fire College annually to fire departments. Our men attend these training sessions at the local departments, and it has brought about excellent working relationships between the two groups.

All of this has resulted in some 284 training schools—with 3,245 trainees certified for the 8-hour course. Some 60 of the schools represent brand new volunteer fire departments which were organized due to rural fire defense efforts.

H. K. MIKELL

A wide variety of equipment is made available free of charge to cooperating fire departments.

The equipment includes:

Four-wheel drive tanker vehicles no longer suitable for constant use.

Federal excess property in six-by-six, multi-drive pumpers, and other equipment which may be adapted to fire fighting are utilized.

Sometimes, big tank trucks are leased, aircraft engine crates form half-tanks, with 800-900 gallon capacity.

Usually this equipment is in good running condition, but must have minor work, handled by the cooperator. Some of these departments have taken a great deal of pride in this equipment.

We reserve the right to cancel the lease, if the equipment is not properly used or maintained. So far, 180 pieces of equipment have been leased under this arrangement.

Working with volunteer fire department groups has been a very refreshing experience. It exemplifies the idea of people helping themselves and that means government is required to spend less to do the job. The results have been better than we hoped for. Many success stories could be reported but let this illustration suffice:

Three years ago, in Wakulla County, Florida, the people depended on one 300-gallon pumper of ours, equipped for woods fire suppression. Today, they have five very active volunteer departments. They have been credited with considerable savings, and they have been very helpful to us by releasing our equipment and crews to be of more assistance to landowners.

Let us stress this last point, because it ties in specifically with the matter of burning assistance. The fewer wildfires our people have to contend with, the more time they will have to assist landowners with other problems, including controlled burning.

These conferences are particularly concerned with the use and effects of fire, and we appreciate this opportunity to discuss the work of the Florida Forest Service with you.

In closing, a final point: There is a problem related to burning which is receiving, in my opinion, too little attention—air pollution caused by burning.



FIG. 2. Florida Forest Service on lease arrangement made this truck available to a Volunteer Fire Department. The volunteers equipped it with a 500 gallon tank and pump powered from the truck's power take-off.

Researchers are considering this problem. It's our hope that we will have some alternatives, when we are confronted with "no burning" edicts from the air pollution controllers.

OUTDOOR RECREATION: THE FLORIDA FOREST SERVICE PROGRAM

The great outdoors!

Who doesn't yearn to get outside to follow any number of pursuits—fishing, hunting, golfing, hiking, camping, or picnicking?

Seeking pleasure outdoors is a favorite American pastime. And here in Florida, particularly, where we are blessed with a marvelous year round mild climate, hundreds of thousands of Floridians and visitors take to the outdoors.

Our ancestors hacked their way through primitive forests to build cities, homes, and factories. Today, we are all huddled together,

working in concrete and steel caverns—craving to get right back to where our ancestors started this thing called “civilization.”

We all want a brief taste, occasionally, of an area that has not yet been ruined by automobile exhausts, smog, jackhammers pounding, traffic lights, and people . . . people . . . people, scurrying everywhere.

Florida's state government is keenly aware of the pressing need for development of adequate facilities. An Outdoor Recreation Council has been established, to coordinate state and private recreation developments, and to purchase attractive sites for future generations to enjoy. A number of state agencies are involved in this program. The Florida Forest Service is working actively on recreation sites and facilities.

The Service manages four state forests, covering more than 300,000 acres. The largest, Blackwater River State Forest, in northwest Florida, has many prime areas for outdoor recreation. Two lakes have been constructed by the Service, and stocked with fish by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission.

To guide visitors, the Service has published brochures identifying and locating the many fine areas for camping, swimming, and other outdoor pleasures at Blackwater and Withlacoochee State Forests.

The Withlacoochee is located in Citrus, Sumter, Hernando, and Pasco counties. Altogether, there are some 26 designated recreation areas within the Withlacoochee boundaries, including many fine natural campsites. The new Interstate 75 cuts through the forest, making it even more accessible to people in the Tampa Bay-Lakeland area.

Prime recreation areas along the Withlacoochee River are presently being developed by the Service. Two other state forests, Cary, near Jacksonville, and Pine Log, near Panama City, have not yet been developed for recreation purposes.

Florida Forest Service towersites, scattered throughout the state, also present opportunities for development. Picnic sites and restroom facilities have been established at some towersites, with plans to expand this service to other prime locations.

Development of recreation areas on privately owned land also is

being encouraged. Buckeye Cellulose Corporation of Foley recently opened four beautiful sites for public use, in cooperation with the Service.

Public use of state and privately owned land for recreation will increase enormously in the future. The Florida Forest Service will continue to do its best to provide opportunities for present and future generations to enjoy the natural, unspoiled beauty of our great outdoors.