

PRESCRIBED FIRE AND THE PUBLIC: GETTING THE MESSAGE OUT

Lane Green

Executive Director, Tall Timbers Research Station and Land Conservancy

DR. KEVIN ROBERTSON: Our last speaker for the Plenary Session is Lane Green, who has been the Executive Director of Tall Timbers Research Station and Land Conservancy since 1991. Lane has had an iron in just about every fire having to do with promoting public awareness of prescribed burning. He was instrumental in forming the prescribed fire councils in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. He's a founding member of the scoping group for the Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils. He's directed two successful statewide prescribed fire awareness campaigns, and he's about to start a new one that's going to cover a 13-state area.

In Georgia and Florida, Lane's face is about as familiar as Smokey Bear from all of public service announcements and videos in which he has been featured over the years. He also serves on the Florida Acquisition and Restoration Council, that many of you know as the ARC Committee, which recommends conservation land purchases for the Florida Forever Program and which has preserved hundreds of thousands of acres in Florida. Whenever I tell somebody I work at Tall Timbers, the invariable response is, "I know Lane Green." So during this conference I hope you get to know him, too, if you haven't already. Let's welcome Lane.

MR. GREEN: Thanks, Kevin. Two of my favorite things in life are, one, to set fire, and the other is to talk to somebody about why we do it. So this is a real honor and privilege for me.

We're going to talk about four key questions in this public awareness effort. One is: How important is it to get the message out to the public? Number two is: Whose job is it anyway? And the third one is: What message? And the fourth one is: How do we get it out?

And before I leave this slide right here, this is a billboard that we used in 1999 after the wildfires of '98 when we did our first statewide campaign. We did a public opinion pre-survey, based a campaign on it, and did a post-survey. And this is the first time Tall Timbers had ever not first and foremost promoted the ecological imperative of fire. What the people of Florida were interested in is how you're going to protect me from fire. So this simple billboard shows a raging wildfire and a gentle prescribed burn. This or This. And it had very good results. It says fight fire with fire on the billboard. Our actual campaign said this: "Support prescribed burning; it's our best wildfire insurance." So this was an interesting transition for us in this campaign. And I have to tell you a quick story about it. After the wildfires of '98, I was fortunate to be appointed to the governor's task force and chaired the mitigation committee where you try to figure out how you're going to prevent these things from happening in the future. Palm Coast has been mentioned today. I was part of a group that went in and talked to homeowners in Palm Coast who had lost almost an entire subdivision, and I talked to one lady from Michigan who was standing up

in front of her burned-down house saying, "Why didn't somebody tell me?" She said, "We're retired. My husband and I moved down here and bought a few acres. It was beautiful. We had trees hanging over the house that helped with heating and cooling bills. We had bird feeders. We even had deer coming to a salt block. It was a paradise, just paradise. And then one day somebody comes and knocks on the door and says, 'You've got to get out of here in five minutes. Your house is going to burn down.' So why is it that it was the first time we heard that? Where is the guy that sold us the land, who could have told us this is a flammable area, that we have fire-dependent vegetation? Where is the permitter who in building the house didn't say anything about Firewise, or not to have a wood shingle roof, or not to have a fence running out into the woods, or not to have flammable vegetation growing up around the house?" And she said, "If we built a house on the coast in Florida, we would have to protect it from high winds, rising water, and follow all those permitting regulations. There was none of that. Where was the Division of Forestry? They're the guys in charge of fire, right? Why didn't somebody tell me?" And we heard this from a lot of people.

So I think we learned a lot from that, and there are programs now that are helping people understand that. We still haven't gotten into the growth management area. I think you saw this morning in the strategic plans for Georgia and Florida about the fact that we have to get involved in growth management. We have to prepare people. We have, as Jim said, thousands of people a day moving to Florida from areas that never burn, so to them fire is scary.

All right. The first question is: How important is it to get the message out? First of all, we need to counteract 60+ years of the message that fire is bad by the Ad Council and Smokey Bear. Since 1944, the voice of fire has been, "Only you." And as Mark mentioned, we need to have something that gives a positive message about prescribed fire, and we need to get that out there.

When Tall Timbers was formed in 1958, we took on Smokey Bear. He was the enemy. And we probably had a lot of interesting battles over that one, though I wasn't around at that time. But, July 6th of 1996, the founders of Tall Timbers were vindicated in the national headlines. We have it in an exhibit in our education center. It was an AP [Associated Press] headline that says, "It seems Smokey was wrong," front page. The subheading said, "As it turns out, American forests need fire to remain healthy and be free of wildfires." And that was 12 years ago. So we had the opportunity at that time to take that headline and run with it. But we've kind of walked with it and trotted with it, and now it's time to run with it and go from there.

Now one of the other reasons that it's important to get the message out is we produce smoke. Smoke can be a

nuisance and nobody wants their daily life interfered with by smoke. Nobody likes ashes in their pool, smoke in their drapes, or impaired visibility. So we need to do a better job of controlling our smoke. Dale Wade and Hugh Mobley, in their publication called *Managing Smoke at the Wildland and Urban Interface* in June 2007, really give us a challenge. This is what they said, and I believe it: "The public is unlikely to continue to tolerate the use of prescribed fire, regardless of the benefits, if burn managers can't keep smoke out of smoke-sensitive areas." So that's a challenge for sure. And at some of our workshops at the Summit and for the fire messaging, I think it was Dave Brownlie who came up with the challenge, "You have to own your smoke." So that's the part of the education, not with the public, but with fire managers. We have to own our smoke from the first match until the last residual smoke is gone, and to take responsibility for it.

This slide of a raging wildfire is what the public believes about fire. This is what they see on the news and the headlines, the destructive nature of fire. Very seldom do you see a nice prescribed burn on the front page or headlining the six o'clock news, and we can do something about that as well.

So headlines depict disasters. We learned about what else the public believes from our surveys in 1998, 1999, and in 2004, 2005, when we did our second campaign, and from a survey that South Carolina did as kind of a pre-survey about public opinions, and from partners in fire education who have done a recent survey in 2008. Let me just tell you some of the things that the public believes and doesn't believe. First of all, they do not connect with the term "prescribed fire." Nobody knows what it means, or very few. But 95 percent of the people in Florida know what controlled burning is. And I'll tell you a little bit later why they like the term "controlled burning," even though we have been trying desperately to get rid of that term. So one of the things that is a challenge for us is in this One Message is that term "prescribed fire." That's what we talk about among ourselves, to the professional, practitioner, scientist. Is there another way we have to talk to the public about good fire? As a matter of fact, the Division of Forestry in Florida back in the early '90s had a door hanger which I loved, and I still have one of them. Just like the billboard, on one side it shows "This is bad fire," on the other side, "This is good fire." Very simple.

The public worries about the safety of wildlife in a fire. So in all our publicity and awareness ads for PSAs [public service announcements], radio, newspaper, whatever we did, we had to say that wildlife were fine. Wildlife grew up with fire. Birds fly away, snakes crawl in holes, and deer bounce away. They're used to dealing with fire. So that was something in the post-survey data from the yearlong campaign throughout Florida.

They believe that smoke is smoke is smoke. They don't recognize any difference between the smoke from a prescribed fire and smoke from a wildfire. Smoke is smoke. But this is interesting: 70 percent of the population of Florida believes that fire is beneficial to ecosystem processes, to plants and animals. But they worry about the safety of those animals when you burn.

They also believe that prescribed fire may be able to reduce the risk of wildfire, and they're willing to tolerate a little smoke because of positive benefits. That was 1999.

What Dale Wade wrote in 2007 begins to contradict that or say that, yeah, they're okay with a little smoke, but we're putting too much on them now and they're going to reject prescribed burning if we can't keep smoke out of their daily lives.

And then in 2004, after another pre-survey, a yearlong campaign, and a post-survey, still 95 percent of the people identify with controlled burning and very few with prescribed fire. So we haven't made any progress. Yes, they still believe it's beneficial, has a natural role, and helps prevent wildfires, but they're still worried about their wildlife. As far as whether or not wildfire smoke and prescribed fire smoke are equally damaging to public health, it's 50/50. But there's a significant increase in awareness of the benefits of fire, and with men more than women. That probably wouldn't surprise you.

Also, something interesting to learn in that survey is, the higher the income of the public, the more understanding they have of prescribed fire. So their understanding is maybe what we call the science of it. But here's another one: Protecting air quality is way more important than burning natural areas. We're still second fiddle.

There was also the Partners in Education survey, in which several groups across the country, including the Forest Service, Wildlife Society, and I think another member, spent some time surveying public opinions. And what they found out was basically the same information that we found out and the same as what South Carolina found, so it's not anything really unique to Florida. But we looked at fire terms. Still, "controlled burning" is what people identify with. They also tried out some other terms. About 25 percent of the people said that "managed burns" would be okay. "Proactive burns," a little bit less than that. "Prescribed burns," 8 percent in their surveys. And this is a broad-ranging survey, mostly in the West and Midwest, I think.

Now the next one is interesting. Who do they believe telling them that fire is important? Park rangers: 76 percent. Somebody with a uniform that looks friendly. Guess what Smokey Bear is dressed in. A park uniform, right? He's a park ranger. And firefighters are right behind that, somebody who is in a uniform dressed up talking about the benefits of fire. Scientists didn't do well. I'm sorry. Scientists were way down. They were just about at the bottom of the barrel, with federal land managers. Dave [Brownlie], I'm sorry, and for the rest of you. But, anyway, we need to get believable people talking to them. That's what that's all about.

What is our desired outcome from any kind of message that we want to put out there? We want public support. As you heard this morning in our strategic plans, we want the public to demand, "Why haven't you burned that acreage next to me? Who owns that? It's got fuels accumulated. There's going to be a wildfire." If we could get the public to that point, we would be in great shape. We want them to also understand the ecosystem health issues and wildfire issues. And probably the most important reason that we need to get the message out to the public is that they can shut us down. We can be regulated out of it, or they can just not like it.

About the Palm Coast folks that got burned out, and Jim Brenner, you can correct me if I'm wrong, but I think there was an attempt to do some fuel reduction burning around the Palm Coast subdivision some time prior to the wildfires of '98, or at least that's the story I heard. But their thoughts

were, “We don’t want any smoke. We don’t want any bother. We’re in great shape.” Is that somewhat true, Jim?

JIM BRENNER: Yeah.

MR. GREEN: Thank you. That’s the shortest answer I ever got from Jim.

The second question we’re going to talk about is: Whose job is it anyway? And really Dennis [Haddow] answered that question, Jim Karels answered that question, as did Alan Dozier. It’s us. After looking at it, I have yet to find anywhere, in any agency, state, local, federal, anybody in a nonprofit organization, whose primary job, in their job description, is to wake up every morning thinking about how to promote prescribed fire. Is there anybody for whom that’s the number one priority in their job description? Good. Where are you from?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: National Park Service.

MR. GREEN: Fantastic. That’s wonderful. So we’ve got one. We need a few more. And that’s the way it needs to be, that there is somebody every day who wakes up thinking about how to promote prescribed burning and how to get the public to understand that wildfires are bad, and can be prevented by prescribed fire. So prescribed fire users must make this a mandate. You need to tell somebody about how this is in our own best interest, and maybe the ultimate way that we get to continue to use fire is if you make time to tell somebody. If we don’t do it, nobody else is going to do it. We have to protect our own self-interest.

And what’s on the slide right here is a median burn. One of the crazy things we do at Tall Timbers is we burn the median and right-of-way of the four-lane highway that’s the gateway into Florida and north of Tallahassee, Highway 319. Some of you may have come down it. And it’s planted with native vegetation that’s fire dependent. One of the requirements was that it be burned, and we work with the Division of Forestry to do that. And we finally got DOT [Department of Transportation] on our side. That was a battle. DOT knows how to mow roadsides, but fire and cars and traffic? It just doesn’t work. But we’ve successfully done it for the past five years. It’s become kind of a national model. And it’s an educational opportunity, when somebody gets directed safely through smoke on the road. We have troopers, we have deputies, we have DOT flashing signs, we have people in Nomex, we have everything looking safe so far. And so it’s a great educational opportunity, and the only thing we’re lacking is putting up some kind of signs, which DOT doesn’t really want us to do, telling people to notice this is black today, but it’s going to turn green. The wildflowers are going to grow, and fire is important, and all that good stuff, like Burma-Shave. So maybe we need to go to Burma-Shave signs.

So what message? What is the message? We have used quite a few in our campaigns. What we have talked about at our Florida and Georgia prescribed fire councils, Coalition scoping groups, and in strategic plans, is we have to have a single message, and we have to have many voices. So in the summer of 2007, we set about trying to do that with three states, Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. We brought them together to talk about beginning, through a series of facilitative workshops, to develop a common message. And going in before the meeting, everybody was saying, “Oh, this is going to be one of those ‘great taste, less filling’ wars. Is it for ecosystem health? Is it reducing wildfire risk? Who

is going to win? What is that message going to be?” But we found out a way to deal with that. The group went through a series of exercises, including social marketing and target audience identification.

One of the things we found out is that the public isn’t just the public. There are probably 20+ components to the public. Is the public kids? Is the public senior citizens? Is the public middle class? Who are the public? Are they politicians? So you have to target your message and refine it according to who the public is. Smokey’s new message, I can’t understand it. Have any of you seen his Web site? His Web site is full of the positive benefits of fire. I’m so proud of Smokey. He really knows what the positive benefits are. But his message is, “Get Your Smokey On.” Do you think that’s aimed at senior citizens? I’m one. I have no idea what “Get Your Smokey On” means. I thought it might have been one of those subliminal messages.

We also talked about desired behavioral changes. When you’re trying to educate somebody or make them aware of something, you want them to change their behavior in some way. So what are we trying to change?

And then we talked about some message mapping. Message mapping is a scientifically proven method used by corporate America and government to sell products and services and elect candidates. It consists of three things, three key messages. All of a sudden it tastes great, and it’s less filling. And folks say, “Whew, we can include ecosystem health and include reducing the risk of wildfires.” And it has to be said or read in 27 words, and it can only take nine seconds. That’s the current attention span of the public, nine seconds. It’s one second less than the amount of time it takes smoke on the road to cause an accident.

We came up with an answer to the question, What is prescribed fire? It is a safe way to apply a natural process, ensure ecosystem health, and reduce wildfire risk. Easy, nine seconds, 27 words or less, three messages. And those are the three messages we came up with in this group. So we’re using this. Since that time, we’re using it everywhere we can. We’re test marketing and looking at it. It’s a mouthful. But if a reporter asks you what is prescribed fire, that’s what you ought to say. And then if you get time to talk beyond nine seconds, you can take each one of those key messages: It’s natural. Why is it natural? What is natural? Ecosystem health, explain that. And then explain reducing wildfire risk.

What’s the next step? You heard both Alan [Dozier] and Jim [Karels] refer to this 13-southern-state effort that we’re involved in and will be getting started very shortly. It’s funded by the Forest Service and the Southern Group of State Foresters. And we’ll be doing a series of things. That message that we’ve developed, we have to take that, or something like it, and brand that message. We have to get it down to an “Only You,” or “Good Fire,” or something we can use to brand that message with a logo and artwork that would show what it is, so every time you see it you would know that we’re promoting prescribed fire.

We need to produce a public opinion survey for all the 13 southern states and teach them how to use a pre-survey and a post-survey of public perceptions because every state might be a little different. And the reason you do the pre-survey is to find out where the people are, so you can target your campaign and then do the post-survey and measure it afterwards.

We have to produce collateral materials for each state, radio and TV PSAs, using the brands, using the message, using the logo. We'll use newspaper scripts, press releases, billboards, Translites. We want signs on buses and railway stations that talk about prescribed fire, bumper stickers, and the list goes on. So after those are produced, we have to train each state forestry agency to use the materials and the surveys. And then we have to expand and broaden the reach, if it works well in the 13 southern states, using fire councils, using the Coalition, and enlisting everybody's effort to move this message out across the country. This is something you'll be hearing more about, so stay tuned.

The fourth question is: How do we get the message out? Each fire user needs to communicate with neighbors, with adjoining landowners, local media, law enforcement, on every burn if possible. Now you say, geez Louise, I've hardly got time to burn. I don't have time to do all that. We have to find ways to do that. My favorite saying is, "Never miss an opportunity to tell anyone what you're doing and why." And I've added something to it since then: "Explain to them how you are managing risk." I forgot to tell you, the reason the public likes "controlled burn" is it implies that someone is managing risk and controlling that fire.

Invite the media to burn demos, and put them in Nomex. The prescribed fire councils are doing that in Florida and Georgia, and some of the organizations are doing Prescribed Fire Awareness Week because that's one way you get to the public. If you can get the media saying the right thing, get them excited about it, hook them, then they'll write something good about you. Bruce [Ritchie], thank you.

When we were going around the state of Florida doing press conferences and burn demos as part of this latest campaign, the most interesting one and the one that was the most fun was a helicopter burn. The media was fascinated. They were out there in the woods watching ping-pong balls falling on the ground and seeing them explode. The cameras were rolling. It was the most amazing thing they'd ever seen, and they loved it. We finally got some good publicity out of it.

Hold a press conference prior to the burning season in your area just to tell people how many acres you're going to be burning and when you might see smoke. Back when we started running the public service announcements, it seemed that every time somebody was coming into Florida from another state, and they had never seen fire, when they see smoke, or they see a fire in the woods, any time day or night, they were calling 9-1-1. And when we started running the public service announcements in this region, we got a message back from the folks that handle dispatch that said they were getting fewer 9-1-1 calls. So the public perception is that it's not a problem every time there's fire in the woods, and that fire is natural and somebody is out there taking care of it.

Speak to civic clubs, other community groups, every opportunity you get, about fire and what you're doing. Develop a display for community events or at fairs and festivals. You saw in the very first slide the Prescribed Fire Awareness Day at the Capitol. You saw the Prescribed Fire Training Center exhibit and Commissioner [Charles] Bronson, our agricultural commissioner, talking. All of those things are important. This slide shows a media burn in the Cary State Forest, one we did with one of the prescribed fire councils years ago, which got us great publicity in the

Jacksonville area, and it was important to do. You've already heard about county commission meetings, but get on the agenda at your county commission before the burn season. Tell them, "We're going to be burning four hundred thousand acres over the next three months and just wanted y'all to know."

Resolutions. You've heard all about this. It's fantastic. The other thing you have heard is to join or form a prescribed fire council and make public awareness a priority. And I guess the last one is be proactive, be creative, and just find ways to tell people something about prescribed fire whenever you get that opportunity. Any questions?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: The question I have for you, about the campaign coming up, is: What is the preferred tactic now, after all these years, of "prescribed fire" versus "controlled burning"? You know, you want to come out in the public eyes as using the better terminology. So do we continue to try and educate them as to what prescribed fire means, or do we change our tactics to use the words "controlled burning"?

MR. GREEN: That's a great question. I don't think I know the answer to that right now. I can tell you this, that this group that just did the survey in 2008 included the Forest Service, your folks. They had a big meeting about all of this, and everybody went away mad because I think it was your folks that said, "We're not changing from 'prescribed fire.' We've worked hard to get there, and our agency is going to stick with 'prescribed fire.'" And I don't think that's the point of it. Prescribed fire to us is exactly what we want it to mean. It describes what we do. It's professional. It's the whole nine yards. But I had a filmmaker who was visiting with us who does lots of commercials. He's out of New York, and I was telling him, "We have to do something to promote prescribed fire." He was working on another documentary. He said, "The first thing you have to do is lose that term. 'Prescribed fire' is a mouthful. You can hardly even say it. And if you're going to educate the public, you have to be talking with them at the eighth-grade, ninth-grade level. So find something different." I'm not up here advocating that we lose the term "prescribed fire." When you're talking to the choir, "prescribed fire" it is. But when we say something to the public, it's going to have to be shorter, sweeter, and simpler. Like I say, it could be as simple as "Good. We're the good fire people." I don't know. That comes from Jeff Foxworthy. We're the new people.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: It's interesting that it wasn't long ago that even "controlled burning" wasn't accepted or wasn't understood. And how did it become understood? There wasn't any real educational campaign to try to make it acceptable.

MR. GREEN: Right. That's the question I keep asking myself. Somebody did a good job of selling "controlled burn," or it made sense. It's a burn under control. It's not one out of control. Maybe that was the initial thinking. But that's some of the stuff we have to unravel. In this effort, we'll be using some of the best marketing PR [public relations] folks in the country to look at this and working with the 13 states, forestry departments, and the prescribed fire councils in those states to try to come up with something that we can test against. We may not come up with the ultimate best, but we have to have something we can test.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: These surveys you keep referring to, do you ever get a little concerned about the results of those surveys? Because you use the results from them like it's a reflection of society as a whole. And isn't it more just a result of those that take the time to return the surveys?

MR. GREEN: No, it's not a returned survey. It's done by professional surveying folks. It's all done with phone calls, and it's done with the voting population, 21 and up. And it's selected so that the survey results have a 95 percent confidence level. So it's not like a random mail out to everybody, and those who decide to turn it in. It's a professional effort the way everybody surveys anything. You know, if I'm running for office and I hire a firm to find out if I'm doing well or bad, it's the same kind of professional work. And we'll do that with developing the questions. A lot of it has to do with how you ask the question and what questions you ask. We're not good at that. We know people who are. They use the best techniques, just like doing a research project and saying my results are within a 95 or 98 percent confidence level. That's what it tells you. It's not happenstance or talking to people on the street.

And one of the things we'll do in developing this One Message is to spend time seeing what we come up with in malls, in communities, Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, from talking to people, asking them what do they think about this, while we go through this process. Hopefully, it will come out with something that will have some credibility, and then we have to put it out there and see if it flies. But we're looking forward to that. It's something we have been talking about for a while, and we're excited about working with it. Thank you very much for all of you being here at the conference.

DR. ROBERTSON: That concludes our Plenary Session. Thanks to all of the excellent speakers this morning.

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