

FLORIDA'S REGIONAL FIRE COUNCILS: TOOLS FOR FIRE MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Florida's natural communities evolved under the influence of frequent, low-intensity lightning fires. Many communities require such fires for continued existence. Fire managers must contend with the increasing pressure of a burgeoning population. The state's population increases by 900 people per day. With each day of population growth, prescribed burning becomes more difficult. Three regional fire councils have been created to help ensure that prescribed fire remains a viable tool for managing Florida's private and public lands. The South Florida Interagency Wildland Fire Council was the first to be established, in October 1974, in response to severe wildfire problems. The North Florida Prescribed Fire Council was established in September 1989, followed by the Central Florida Prescribed Fire Council in February 1992. The mission of the councils is to encourage the exchange of information, techniques, and experiences among practitioners of prescribed fire, and to promote a public understanding of the importance and benefits of prescribed fire. Each council is composed of representatives from various private and public organizations and agencies involved in prescribed burning. Effective land, landscape, and especially ecosystem management in Florida require sound fire management. Population growth, public opinion, and smoke management concerns can easily result in further regulation or prohibition of prescribed burning. Florida's fire councils are working to ensure that prescribed fire remains a land management tool.

Citation: Miller, Steven R. 1998. Florida's regional fire councils: tools for fire management. Pages 41–43 in Teresa L. Pruden and Leonard A. Brennan (eds.). Fire in ecosystem management: shifting the paradigm from suppression to prescription. Tall Timbers Fire Ecology Conference Proceedings, No. 20. Tall Timbers Research Station, Tallahassee, FL.

INTRODUCTION

Of the 42 terrestrial and palustrine communities in Florida, 19 are dependent on fire for their continued existence (FDNR 1990). Of those 19 communities, 12 are identified as rare, imperiled or critically imperiled (FDNR 1990). Florida experiences more lightning strikes than any other region of the country (Abrahamson et al. 1984). Prior to European settlement, lightning-caused fires, along with fires started by aboriginal Floridians, maintained these natural communities.

Time and human population growth have brought changes. Millions of people now live in Florida. With them came cities, highways, schools, and airports, none of which can tolerate free roaming, unplanned fires. Because of habitat fragmentation, natural fire can no longer be counted on for ecosystem maintenance. Responsible land management agencies are endorsing an ecosystem approach to management of wildlands, namely, one that recognizes the necessity of natural conditions, functions, and processes. Therefore, prudent land managers are dependent on prescribed burning.

Just as natural fire has been restricted and controlled, the use of prescribed fire faces restrictions and prohibitions. Brenner and Wade (1992:27) describe how prescribed fire has "come under increasing attack." They explain that this is due, in part, not just to more people but that these people also have a different background and value set and are not aware of the positive values of prescribed fire. Twice in the past few years, residents and local governments have attempted to severely restrict or even prohibit prescribed

burning. The legal climate has also changed. Society has become increasingly litigious.

In response to the changing political and legal environment, prescribed burners have organized into three regional fire councils. The purpose of this paper is to describe how these regional fire councils serve fire managers.

BACKGROUND

The South Florida Interagency Wildland Fire Council was established in October 1974. This council is made up entirely of agency representatives and has more of a wildfire focus. Formation of the council stemmed from a recommendation made during an interagency conference called to discuss the severe wildfire problems South Florida had been experiencing. Recommendations from the conference called for interagency coordination and for strong emphasis to be placed on prescribed burning as a tool for reducing wildfire problems (FDACS 1974).

During September 1989 the North Florida Prescribed Fire Council was formed. This council has representation from private landowners and organizations, as well as from public agencies. The Central Florida Prescribed Fire Council was formed, with a similar composition, in February 1992. See Table 1 for the membership of each council.

MISSION

The mission of the North and Central Florida Prescribed Fire Councils is to encourage the exchange of

Table 1. Organization and agency membership in the three regional Florida Fire Councils.

Organization	Florida Fire Council		
	North	Central	South
Archbold Biological Station		x	
Bureau of Indian Affairs			x
Cattlemen		x	
Florida Department of Environmental Protection	x	x	x
Florida Division of Forestry	x	x	x
Forest Industry	x	x	
Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission	x	x	x
Hunting Plantations	x		
Institute of Food and Agriculture Science Extension		x	
Municipal Fire Services		x	x
National Audubon Society		x	
Non-industrial Private Landowners	x	x	
Tall Timbers Research Station	x		
The Nature Conservancy	x	x	
U.S. Department of the Interior Fish and Wildlife Service	x	x	x
U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service	x	x	
U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service			x
U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service		x	
U.S. Department of Defense	x	x	
Water Management Districts	x	x	x

information, techniques, and experiences among practitioners of prescribed fire in Florida, and to promote public understanding of the importance and benefits of prescribed fire. The mission of the South Florida Interagency Wildland Fire Council is somewhat different, but emphasizes a similar purpose.

The objectives of the North and Central Florida Councils are to:

- Provide a framework for communications in relation to prescribed fire objectives, techniques, and issues;
- Review prescribed fire problems and develop courses of action;
- Disseminate technical information;
- Promote the development and utilization of prescribed fire practices commensurate with desirable environmental resource management;
- Promote public understanding of the benefits of prescribed fire.

Each organizational stakeholder, such as the timber industry or a conservation group, has a representative on the steering committee of the respective council. Steering committees meet twice annually as do the full councils.

Exchange of Information, Techniques, and Experiences

During the council meetings, information is shared among fellow prescribed fire practitioners. Emphasis is placed on demonstrating new equipment and techniques. Presentations have ranged from fuel moisture reading techniques to a "Dragon Wagon" that lights fire and applies a wet line in a single pass.

An extremely popular part of the information sharing process is "what went wrong" or "lessons learned" presentations. During these presentations, practitioners share experiences from prescribed burns that strayed from the original plan. While it is difficult to tell a group of your peers how your fire escaped, sharing this information may make them better prepared to deal with similar situations. By helping to prepare one another for the inevitable problems, members help minimize the risks.

Training is also coordinated through the councils. This coordination increases the range of courses available and increases the efficiency of training by reducing the number of courses taught.

Networking through the councils' activities has facilitated interagency prescribed fires. Agencies have pooled resources to conduct prescribed fires when they have adjacent lands or when they individually lack all the resources required for a complex burn. Cooperative burning offers one solution to the increased workloads of land managers and the reductions in work force.

Promote Public Understanding of the Importance and Benefits of Prescribed Fire

Wade (1993:352) asked, "Is it inevitable that society will eventually prohibit prescribed burning and thereby relegate perpetuation of this ecosystem to chance wildfires? It could happen, but in my opinion only if we fire managers abdicate our responsibilities or carry them out in such a manner that we alienate the public." He says that fire managers should make sure the public is well-informed. At least two studies of public reaction to prescribed fire have shown that the public has little knowledge of prescribed fire policies and that negative reactions to prescribed fire can be reduced through increased information (Manfredo et al. 1990, Daniel 1990).

In an effort to inform the public, the councils have developed brochures, posters, flyers, and door hangers. The councils have encouraged their members to make presentations to local civic organizations, such as Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs. Council meetings have included media panels so that members can learn the needs of the media and members of the media can learn about the opportunities for news offered by the prescribed fire professionals.

Recently, the councils have coordinated an effort to have individual counties pass resolutions acknowledging the importance of prescribed fire and supporting the continued use of prescribed burning. To date, 38 of 67 counties in Florida have signed resolutions supporting prescribed fire. The councils also assisted in the passage of the 1990 Florida Prescribed Burning Act. This act protects burners from liability unless they are proven negligent.

The infrastructure offered by the councils allows fire managers to react quickly and in a coordinated fashion to potential efforts to prohibit or restrict prescribed burning. Recently, when two counties began efforts to prohibit burning, the councils were able to respond quickly and counter misinformation with

facts. Preparing information in advance and responding in an organized and professional fashion helped dissuade those counties from following through in their efforts to prohibit burning.

CONCLUSION

As time passes, the job of the prescribed burner increases in complexity. Increased development, regulation, and public demands all contribute to the complexity. Gone are the days of deciding "today is a good day for a burn" by merely looking out the window. Fire managers must continually increase their own knowledge through research, training, and communication. They must also ensure that the public is knowledgeable about the benefits of prescribed burning. In Florida, the regional fire councils are tools to help fire managers do just that.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Frank Cole for his encouragement in preparing this paper and for his review and comments.

Thanks also to Martha Friedrich and Jim Stevenson for their editorial comments.

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