



# *Seeing the Forest through the Trees*

Proceedings of the Sixth Longleaf Alliance Regional Conference  
November 13-16, 2006  
Tifton Campus Conference Center  
University of Georgia  
Tifton, GA



# Linking State Prescribed Fire Councils as a Coalition: A Proposal to Promote Media and Public Understanding of Rx Fire, and to Nationally Address Key Management, Policy, and Regulatory Issues

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## Abstract

The rural southern United States is experiencing rapid changes in land use and demographics, with increased challenges for landowners and managers of public and private lands to conduct prescribed burning of pine woodlands and other pyric ecosystems. Across the country there are common issues including public safety, ecological stewardship, liability, public education, and air quality related regulations. Networking the organizations and efforts together within the South, West, and other regions that utilize prescribed fire will increase communication, effectiveness of public education, and especially participation in fire policy decisions and regulatory outcomes. While Florida pioneered the establishment of regional fire councils, active or startup organizations are now emerging in most Southern states and several Midwestern and Western states. A diverse group of private, public and non-governmental leaders has reviewed the opportunities for establishing a coalition of fire councils, as well as for the need to initially examine the science and management context for the new EPA particulate matter emission standards (PM<sub>2.5</sub>), which may place considerable new constraints upon land managers to achieve their prescribed burning goals.

## Introduction

Prescribed fire managers across the nation continue to face new and increasing challenges that limit or threaten the use of prescribed fire. Creating a coalition of prescribed fire councils can prove instrumental in sharing strategies, technology transfer, uniting on initiatives, and public education.

### Current trends that are cause for concern:

- Loss of burning as a key element of rural culture
- More roads and increased traffic in rural areas
- Landowner constraints based on liability concerns

- Lack of consulting practitioner's capacity due in part to liability concerns
- Extended rural-urban interface zones as urban areas push into the countryside
- Increasing limitation of "burn days" due to environmental regulation originally intended to clean-up urban air quality
- General lack of public understanding pertaining to the role of fire in sustaining forest ecosystems – "Smokey Bear" syndrome

### Developing Concerns on 2.5 Micron Particulate Matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) Regulations Intended to Improve Urban Air Quality

- High sulfate PM<sub>2.5</sub> results from burning fossil fuels (e.g. automobiles, diesel engines, and coal burning power plants)
- Smoke from prescribed burning isn't a major cause of emissions but its chemistry fits some of the PM<sub>2.5</sub> pattern
- New PM<sub>2.5</sub> standards will put more urban areas into "non-attainment" air quality status and apply pressure to reduce emissions from fossil fuel burning
- Most state air quality regulators will also focus upon at least monitoring prescribed fire and some may attempt to limit prescribed fire activities
- Dealing with PM<sub>2.5</sub> must be state-by-state as it is implemented and there is a need to ensure every state has excellent information and plans
- All councils should promote a "categorical exclusion" status from PM<sub>2.5</sub> rules from the EPA
- Negative news press based on poor information could shape urban public opinion negatively about prescribed fire. We must promote the positive messages about how it is used to protect human health and safety by reducing harmful wildfires

### **What Can a Coalition Offer?**

- Bring active councils together to collaborate and begin to work effectively
- Seek to strengthen newly developing councils to make them more effective players and allies
- Promote councils in key states where they don't exist now
- Engage other organizations that can play key roles, (e.g. state forestry associations, forest landowner associations, NGO's, state and federal agencies)
- Create a "playbook" of exactly how to deal with state environmental agencies related to PM2.5
- Ensure national-level coordination with federal agencies
- Promote public understanding of prescribed fire

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

- 1) Explore forming a core group of interested parties to create a coalition of councils to effectively deal with issues that impede the use of prescribed fire, which promotes ecological function, public health and safety, biological diversity, and the prevention of catastrophic wildfires.
- 2) Place a high priority on encouraging and assisting new-states to create councils.
- 3) Secure funding and support to launch media campaign to educate the public on the use, need, and forest health values of prescribed fire and to differentiate between prescribed fire vs. wildfire.
- 4) Schedule a conference in 2007 to broaden depth of group to encompass the entire nation and move forward with initiatives at a federal level.

### **Acknowledgements**

The following organizations are playing a key role in the advocacy of prescribed fire in forests: American Forest Council, Environmental Defense, Georgia Forestry Commission, Joseph W. Jones Ecological Research Center, Longleaf Alliance, The Nature Conservancy, Tall Timbers Research Station, US Fish and Wildlife Service, The Wilderness Society, and North Florida, South Carolina and Southwest Georgia Prescribed Fire Councils.