

**For Immediate Release
News Article**

**Contact: Frances Nevill, TNC
407-682-3664, ext 129**

Managing Volusia County's Natural Lands with Prescribed Fire (877 words)

The intensity of the Florida wildfires of 1998 was something that few firefighters had seen before. The widespread blazes, at times sending flames 150 feet in the air and smoke columns more than 30,000 feet high, caused an entire county to be evacuated, closed major highways for days, and destroyed homes, businesses and commercial timber.

The fierce fires were mainly a result of the build up of fuels - dense shrubs, dead leaves, and pine needles - combined with drought, high temperatures, and gusty winds.

Because Florida has become developed and we no longer allow lightning fires to burn, fuels build up to dangerous levels, said Mike Kuypers of the Bunnell district office of the Florida Division of Forestry. For example, we've seen destructive wildfires in Florida over the last few decades because the forests haven't had regular fuel reduction. Florida's pine forests need prescribed fire every few years to maintain safe, reduced fuel levels.

Many different sources of ignition sparked the 1998 fires, from carelessness and arson to lightning. Officials estimate over \$150 million was spent on extinguishing nearly 500,000 acres of wildfires in 1998. Similar fires occurred in 1999.

Now that the impact of the wildfires has caught our attention, it is a good time for residents of Volusia County to learn about one of the best methods for preventing future wildfires: prescribed fire.

What is Prescribed Fire?

Prescribed fire is a land management tool used to restore and maintain fire-dependent ecosystems, enhance forest health, improve wildlife habitat, and prevent wildfire by reducing hazardous fuels. Fire promotes healthy ecosystems by clearing out competing vegetation, cycling nutrients into the soil, providing food for wildlife, and stimulating fire-dependent plants to grow and produce seed.

Prescribed fire is the controlled burning of vegetation based on a prescription that takes into consideration fuel type, fuel moisture, relative humidity, air temperature, wind speed, wind direction, and other atmospheric conditions to ensure a safe and successful burn. Prescribed fires are planned, set, and extinguished by trained professionals. All prescribed fires must meet set criteria to be authorized by the Florida Division of Forestry.

Concerns regarding smoke created by prescribed fire are a priority. Wind direction is tested before burning to ensure that smoke will blow away from nearby highways, schools, hospitals, neighborhoods, and other sensitive areas.

One of the greatest benefits of prescribed fire is that it reduces fuels - the underbrush, branches, pine needles, leaves, and dead plant debris that have built up on the forest floor over time. If fuels are not reduced every few years, wildfires can become intense, hot, and destructive.

Prescribed Fire and Natural Communities

Because of Florida's long history of lightning fires, Volusia County's natural systems are adapted to fire and depend on periodic fire to remain healthy. Prescribed burning is a vital tool for managing pine flatwoods, pine sandhills, and sand pine/oak scrub - all found in Volusia County.

The plants and animals of these natural communities are adapted to fire. These natural systems shelter many threatened and endangered plant and animal species that rely on fire to survive, such as the Florida black bear, the Florida scrub-jay, the indigo snake, the gopher tortoise, and the scrub holly. When fire is kept out of these areas, some plant and animal populations decline and eventually disappear.

Because natural fires can no longer move across the landscape as they did historically, prescribed fire at appropriate intervals is necessary to maintain these unique natural communities. For example, prescribed fire reduces the height of scrub vegetation to a level that is suitable for the Florida scrub jay and opens up sandy areas which allows the jays to store their acorns. Fire also generates fresh seeds, fruits, and native plant growth, providing food for these rare species.

Many people have expressed concern about the safety of wild animals during prescribed fires. Most wild animals migrate to safety during the relatively slow-moving prescribed fires. Some animals take refuge by moving to unburned or previously burned areas. Small animals seek shelter under logs, in old trees, and in burrows like those of the gopher tortoise.

A few animals are killed by fire, especially during the growing season when it's warm and most animals are active," said Geoff Babb of The Nature Conservancy. "In most fires, there is only an occasional snake or box turtle casualty. Mammals are rarely killed, and ground nesting birds build new nests and benefit from increased numbers of insects after the fire."

Prescribed fire is also beneficial to the people of Florida. It prevents wildfires and provides improved wildlife habitat, forest, and grazing land. As Florida's population continues to grow, more and more areas will be developed that will require fire protection services. Prescribed fire is a safe and effective land management tool for preventing wildfires.

"Not only does prescribed fire benefit Florida's natural systems and wildlife, it is the best way to reduce dangerous fuels that can lead to wildfires," said Jim Tauber, director of Volusia County Fire Services. "Public acceptance and support of prescribed burning will be key in preventing future wildfires like the fires of 1998."

When considering Florida's population growth and the devastating impact of uncontrolled wildfires, prescribed burning is a prudent approach to the long-term protection of Florida's natural resources and Florida's citizens.

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