

Chapter 5: Wildland Fire Demonstration Areas¹

Martha C. Monroe and Geoff Babb²

This document is a chapter in the Wildland Fire Education Handbook. To learn more about this handbook, please refer to Chapter 1: Introduction to the Wildland Fire Education Handbook (FOR 72).

This chapter of the Wildland Fire Education Handbook contains information to help you set up a successful prescribed fire demonstration area. The IFAS Fact Sheet “Designing a Prescribed Fire Demonstration Area” (FOR 64) explains additional guidelines and offers evidence of the value of demonstration areas in subdivisions. The prescribed fire road-sign was designed to designate an area that was previously burned or that will be burned. You may wish to invite the media to witness the prescribed burn, enabling them to report to the public something that many people will never see.

Case Study of Plantation Pines: Demonstration Burn

The Plantation Pines subdivision in north Volusia County was selected as the demonstration burn site because it has been subjected to wildfire events in the past 12 years. In 1987, a wildfire burned through the area, destroying 9 homes. Although the

subdivision suffered no structure losses during the wildfires of 1998, Plantation Pines was threatened by potential damage due to the Lafayette Landing and Rodeo Road fires that surrounded the subdivision for nearly two weeks. Plantation Pines contains 170 residences. Commercial timberland surrounds the subdivision.

Plantation Pines is a rural subdivision with unpaved roads, no fire hydrants, and 170 residences. The nearest emergency water source is about five miles away, with at least a 30-minute turnaround time if a fire truck needed to refill the tank and return. Commercial timberland surrounds the subdivision.

Volusia County Fire and Rescue Service identified Plantation Pines as a high-risk and priority area with a fuel load that could support a prescribed burn: palmetto and gallberry up to 6 feet tall.

During the summer of 1999, The Nature Conservancy asked the Plantation Pines Land and Homeowners Association to participate in the demonstration project. The members of the association were enthusiastic about cooperating. A prescribed burn plan followed in September, prepared

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2. Martha C. Monroe, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, School of Forest Resources and Conservation, University of Florida, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611. Geoff Babb, Fire Manager, The Nature Conservancy, 6075 Scrubjay Trail, Kissimmee, FL 34759.

by Volusia County Fire Services that identified the month of November as the target window to conduct the burn. Dry weather conditions prevented the burn from occurring earlier.

The Plantation Pines Homeowners Association Fire Liaison published an article in the Plantation Pines newsletter as a result of the summer meeting, informing everyone of a fall controlled burn.

A 12-acre site adjacent to SR 40, owned by the Plantation Pines Land and Homeowners Association (PPLHA) was selected for the demonstration burn. This particular area served as a staging area for firefighting equipment and television satellite trucks during the wildfires of 1998. This site is clearly visible to the residents of Plantation Pines and to passing motorists on SR 40. Two homes adjoin the burn unit to the south. The community mailboxes are also on the southwest corner of the property.

Several days before the demonstration burn, Volusia County Fire Services informed Plantation Pines Fire Liaison that the burn was scheduled for Tuesday, November 16. He posted signs at the mailboxes informing his neighbors of the event. The signs read:

“Notice: Volusia County Fire Dept. will conduct a Controlled Burn” on P.P.L.H.A. property in the vicinity of the Mail Center and parallel to Rt. 40 on TUESDAY—Nov. 16. This is being done to eliminate fuel sources to prevent a reoccurrence of the “Wild Fires” next spring. For info Contact: John Pascale, Volusia County Fire Services, 822-6453.”

The night before the burn, Volusia County Fire Services sent a firefighter to personally visit the three homes closest to the burn property to make sure they were aware of the fire and that they prepared accordingly (e.g. parking away from the traffic, closing windows).

Since the burn presented the opportunity to share prescribed burning information with the local media, a media alert was sent to 20 radio and television stations and newspapers. The alert was prepared and issued by Volusia County's Public Affairs office and stated:

“Controlled Burn Scheduled as Fire Season Nears”

Editor's Note: A 9 a.m. briefing will be held at the intersection of SR 40 and Pine Woods Road. Media and crews will be informed of the purpose of the prescribed burn as outlined in the prescribed burn plan and possible factors affecting fire behavior.

Volusia County Fire Services will be conducting a prescribed burn at 9:30 a.m., Tuesday, November 16, near the entrance to the Plantation Pines subdivision.

“It's a lot better to have prescribed, controlled burning than a wildfire consuming a residential home,” said Deputy Fire Chief Kathleen Weaver. “This is a way of being proactive rather than reactive.”

Due to the influence of La Nina, the fire season from December through April is predicted to be extremely hazardous, according to a Division of Forestry meteorologist. The purpose of a prescribed burn is to reduce the fuel that fire needs especially the underbrush in close proximity to homes.

Volusia County Fire Services is handling this burn in conjunction with the Division of Forestry and the Nature Conservancy. Homeowners in the affected area have received letters informing them of the scheduled burn.

For more information, please contact Weaver at (904) 736-5940.

The demonstration burn was conducted on November 16, 1999. An official representing Volusia County Fire Services served as the burn boss. Volusia County also provided five firefighters and three fire engines. Support was provided by Ormond Beach Fire Department with two firefighters and one engine. Representatives of The Nature Conservancy served as the operations chief, fire behavior and weather specialist, and a media liaison. Division of Forestry supplied a bulldozer and one staff representative. The

Plantation Pines Land and Homeowners Association Fire Safety Liaison was present, as was a Volusia County Extension Agent and a University of Florida Extension Specialist in program evaluation.

Media representatives included all four local television stations and two newspapers. All media representatives were outfitted with appropriate fire gear for safety reasons.

As the burn got underway, it was important to watch the wind and keep smoke off of SR 40 and in the subdivision.

Lessons Learned About Press Materials

Although the media alert was extremely successful in attracting interest from all the major television channels and two newspapers, the media representatives who attended had a few suggestions for future alerts.

1. It would be helpful to have a notice the week prior to the anticipated burn. A fax the day prior to the burn should arrive to alert them to the exact date. Therefore, a media demonstration burn ideally should occur on a weekday (Tuesday through Friday, not on a Monday). This burn was held on a Tuesday.
2. The burn should quickly follow the briefing. In this case, a media briefing was held at 9 a.m. and time was allotted for the reporters to suit up in appropriate gear. However, they waited for three hours before they saw flames. Perhaps they should arrive closer to the anticipated launch of the burn. Some flexibility on the part of the media is required, however, as the burn boss determines the most appropriate time to begin the burn and this time can fluctuate due to weather conditions.
3. All members of the media wore no-mex jumpsuits and hardhats. The media representatives thought this was a good idea because they did not like the idea of sparks and ash falling on their clothing and would not have felt comfortable approaching the fire without protection.

4. It is critical for the media to have one designated liaison. They have questions, they need quotes, they aren't sure where to go and what to avoid, they wonder what will happen next, and they need information. Still photographers also need the names and agency affiliations of anyone they capture on film. Rather than bothering someone who has additional duties and responsibilities, the demonstration prescribed burn should have an Information Liaison.

5. Volusia County residents and media representatives are quite familiar with fire, both wild and prescribed, so this particular group of media representatives did not need a great deal of background information to understand the issues. Another region with less fire experience might.

Lessons Learned About Resident Notification

Perhaps because of their familiarity with wildfire, the members of PPLHA enthusiastically supported this prescribed fire. In addition to the summer meeting, the newsletter notice, and the personal notification of three households, the Volusia County Fire Department held a seminar at one home last spring to discuss what the residents could do to reduce the threat of wildfire. Twenty-five participants were led around a home by a representative of Volusia County Fire Services to explain defensible space strategies. By the time this demonstration burn was announced most neighbors were relieved to have assistance. Some expressed anxiousness about the potential for the fire to get out of control, yet no one complained about the event to the fire liaison. Nevertheless, we still learned some things about informing the neighbors:

1. A "Dear Neighbor" letter should always be sent. It is probably not appropriate to expect the homeowners association to do more than post a notice; the agency responsible for the burn should mail letters to each homeowner, or physically deliver notices to every home.
2. Since they were not personally notified, many members of the association were not aware that the burn would be on Tuesday. Of the six people interviewed, one had read the notice on the association bulletin board, one read the

information in the *Orlando Sentinel* the day of the burn, and the others were not aware of the fire before seeing the fire officials.

3. At least one homeowner was blind. Associations and agencies should work together to identify and notify non-English households and non-readers in the community.
4. Once underway, one neighbor quickly pointed out that he was not concerned that the fire would get away because he saw so many cameras on site! In this instance, this particular resident was comforted by the media's presence. Conducting a media event may help neighbors feel more comfortable with a fire in their neighborhood.
5. Several neighbors smelled smoke, became alarmed, and drove to the entrance of the area to find the source. Once they realized this was not a wildfire, they relaxed. Advanced notice would have prevented some unnecessary concern.
6. This community was well-versed about the threat of wildfire. A community that has not experienced fire first-hand would not have been as comfortable agreeing to the prescribed fire with the limited amount of information that was presented immediately before the burn. One neighbor suggested that less familiar communities receive much more information, much better advanced notice, and much more support.

Lessons Learned About Prescribed Burns in Neighborhoods

Despite years of experience at interface burns, there were a few components of this burn that helped participants recognize the intricacies and demands of the project.

1. A school bus arrived at 2:15 p.m. to drop off elementary students and turned around at the staging area for the burn. Fortunately, the fire had moved away from this corner of the site by then.
2. The mailboxes were also an integral part of the staging area, and even the preferred location for the initial briefing. However, the briefing time

and the mail delivery schedule overlapped on this particular day. Because mail delivery times fluctuate, it is probably wise to get an estimated delivery time on the mail.

3. Finally, the staging area is also where commuters park cars to join car pools. Advanced notice or signs might have kept additional cars out of the way of the traffic, smoke, and sparks. Fortunately, nothing was damaged.
4. Vacant lots are typically full of trash and this one was no exception. In addition to the cans and bottles and tires, a moped was found.

Summary

The demonstration burn was successful in a variety of ways. First and foremost, the 12 acre parcel was burned under prescription to reduce heavy fuel loads that posed a threat to a nearby community. Second, the media arrived to record the burn and convey information about prescribed fire to the viewing and reading public. Their assistance in helping citizens feel more comfortable around prescribed fire cannot be underestimated. Finally, the burn gave the Wildland Fire Education Project an opportunity to pilot test the media alert, "Dear Neighbor" letter concept, and demonstration area recommendations included in this handbook. The lessons learned can be used by other counties and in other burns to enhance their public education value.