

Tools: Shovel, Rake, and ...Fire?

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Smokey who? Smokey Bear, arguably one of the most recognizable characters and successful ad campaigns ever created, never really caught on in the South. Early on, Southern settlers, farmers, ranchers, hunters, and foresters routinely burned the piney woods, but why? Fewer ticks, better grazing, reduced wildland fire hazard—all these reasons are true, but these early land managers also knew (at least on an instinctual level) that these woods were supposed to burn. Science has since proved those early land managers right. Pine savannahs, pine flat-woods, and especially the longleaf pine/wiregrass communities are not only tolerant of fire, they are dependant on fire for their very existence.

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) contains roughly 33,000 acres of upland forest. Most of these uplands were once dominated by fire dependant longleaf pine communities. Longleaf pine/wiregrass woodlands are among the most diverse plant and animal communities, not only in the south, but on the planet. To protect and promote this special ecosystem, the refuge fire staff routinely burns around 10,000 to 12,000 acres annually. Prescribed burning, the planned use of fire to accomplish specific management objectives, improves the habitat not only for deer, turkey, and quail, but also for other non-game species such as the red-cockaded woodpecker, gopher tortoise, and indigo snake. Prescribed burning also reduces fuel accumulations and makes catching and controlling wildland fires much easier. On the refuge, “cooler”, dormant season burns are conducted periodically from December to March. This type of burn is usually done to reduce fuel levels and get the landscape ready for growing season burns. “Warmer”, growing season burns are conducted from April to September. These burns

are usually more intense and more closely imitate natural fires that occur after lightning strikes from summer thunderstorms.

Okefenokee NWR also works with neighboring landowners to conduct prescribed burns on lands adjacent to the Refuge. These burns help to protect both the Refuge and the private landowner from wildland fires, and help to improve wildlife habitat for both game and non-game species. Refuge fire staff plans to burn almost 2,000 acres on International Paper, Superior Pine Products, and Rayonier timberlands in 2004/2005.

Prescribed fire is an essential tool that land managers use to protect and improve forested lands in the south. So this year when you see smoke in the air, remember that homes and valuable timberlands are being protected from wildland fire; remember that a special and unique community of plants and wildlife are also being protected and their habitat promoted for future generations to enjoy; and remember to ask yourself, "Smokey who?"