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Florida's Culture of Fire

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By Jon kohler, JD Broker / Partner – from “The Kohler Chronicles”

To many residents, especially those from a family tree with roots in our state, Florida means “land of flowers,” but should also mean fire, as in prescribed burning. Like most rural Floridians, I grew up with Florida's culture of fire. I didn't think much of it, because to me, it was like mowing a lawn, a regular task that showed pride of land ownership. A neighbor that didn't mow his lawn not only made the neighborhood unsightly but potentially caused a lot of other problems, too. Good neighbors burned. It was as natural as the rain, and the land responded as it would after a good rain: It produced.

Serving on the national board of directors of the largest upland habitat organization in America, Quail Forever, gives me insight and perspective on Florida's history and present use of prescribed fire. Turns out, Mr. Vincent is correct in his observations. Florida leads the nation in prescribed burns. In Florida, we burn 2.1M acres each year. No. 2 is Georgia at 1.2M per year and No. 3 is AL at 944,000 acres per year. Fire is a naturally occurring phenomenon across the entire North American continent. So why is it that Florida leads the nation and once pristine places like California boast only 35,000 prescribed burn acres but 4.4M acres of catastrophic wildfires – that destroy entire towns in growing frequency?

The answer, it turns out, is the very same thing that kept Florida free in 2020 from shutdowns found in other parts of the country. Florida doesn't just do what Washington, D.C. says without some proof.

By the 1920s, major out of state timber interests were politically and financially influential. Foresters nationally believed annual burning did not allow forests to regenerate, that it resulted in soil impoverishment and encouraged “low-value” longleaf pines. From this viewpoint, the Clark-McNary Act of 1924 was passed. The Act withheld federal funds for forestry agencies that tolerated controlled burning. Washington, D.C. was going to have its way.

Also, during this time period, the American Forestry Association sponsored a massive propaganda campaign against burning. From 1927 to 1930, groups of men called “Dixie Crusaders” were sent to the rural South with movie projectors,



posters, and pamphlets to educate people on the destructiveness of prescribed fire.

And who can forget one of the most effective advertising campaigns in U.S. history – Smokey the Bear. Created in the 1940s by the U.S. Forest Service and National Advertising Council, Smokey the Bear warned individuals of the dangers of all forest fires, with an emphasis on stomping them out.

Fortunate for us

now, and the lands that we love, another interest was at work in the Florida panhandle during this same time period. Herbert Stoddard was working at a museum in Milwaukee, WI. In 1924, he was asked by the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey to study the habitat and life of quail in the Red Hills region. He was raised in the Central Florida longleaf woods, so fire was natural to him. From his Red Hills study, he published *The Bobwhite Quail: Its Habits, Preservation, and Increase* in 1931. Today, we know this volume as the catalyst for active land management and, particularly, the use of modern-day prescribed burning. Starting with his research, we Floridians were able to forgo the mandate and propaganda from Washington, D.C., stand up to the out-of-state corporate interests, and do what we knew – and still know – is best for the land and lifestyle we love.

Thank goodness for the science behind the efforts to “just say no” and keeping fire as part of our culture. Today, Tall Timbers is the leader in the nation at spreading the message against Smokey the Bear – and other states are now taking notice.

So, when you see smoke, it's just as good as a soaking rain. One could say it means there will be flowers in the land and others, like me, will say it means the land is free and independent-minded. Let's keep being a role model and hope others find and relearn the lost ways.

