

Case Study:

“Advocate” Key to Fire Department’s Successful Prescribed Fire Service

One person can make a difference in the world, and all the difference in the world in a local community service. That’s been the case in Smithland, Iowa, where former Fire Chief Jeff Peterson’s enthusiasm for prescribed burns has helped the department, the community, the environment, and local landowners.

The year after Peterson became chief, he began leading a change in not only the way the department offered prescribed fire service, but in the way many local people felt about fire. It wasn’t easy.

“When I became chief in 1998, I’d get calls in the middle of the night from people who were doing their own grass burns. They’d light the fire in the late afternoon, and then the fire would get away from them later that night. So we’d have to go out in the dark and put those fires out. That wasn’t what the landowner wanted, because he wanted all the grass burned safely. And it surely wasn’t what we wanted as a department,” Peterson says.

Tired of getting those calls in the middle of the night, he began telling farmers the fire department could do a better job for them. But people in the community weren’t convinced at the time that it was a good thing for the department to offer a prescribed fire service. “Many people didn’t like it. They didn’t think we knew what we were doing, and felt we were just trying to burn the countryside up,” Peterson says. “I think the public was afraid of fire, and the older people in the community just didn’t want to see the change.”

Among the naysayers were members of the Smithland Board of Trustees. “It was very difficult with our board of trustees at first because prescribed fire was new to them. So we started small, with our first burn in 1999, and invited them out to watch,” Peterson recalls. “Now two of the people on the board are volunteers on the department—they’ve seen fire can be a good thing.”

Peterson says education and permissions early on from the board of trustees or town council are critical first steps for a volunteer fire department starting a prescribed fire service. “Then you need to talk to your insurance people and your lawyer,” he says.

Peterson consulted on insurance, but the department didn’t purchase extra insurance for controlled burning projects. “I never had a fire get out of control while I was chief,” he says. He and safety officer Lori Phillips worked to convince people controlled fire could be a good thing, as the department began a 10-year run of prescribed burns on anywhere from 400 acres to 700 acres each year.

Peterson, who stepped down as fire chief in late 2009 after ten years at the helm, believes people see fire and the department differently now. “They can look at the land that was burned, especially the native grasses, and see how much better they grow after a burn. People are less afraid of a fire now,” he says. “Now they think it’s the right thing to do around here.”

“You don’t burn the same area every year, but you do get back to that area in three to four years,” Peterson explains. “After you’ve been on a place and burned it once, it’s really a lot easier the next time around. In some cases, we could ask the landowner to disk a 30-foot strip around a field and tell him to burn it himself.”

The 14-member Smithland Fire Department does most of its burns in the spring of the year. That timing revolves around field conditions, but also around the time volunteers have to conduct the burns. “Some of our members are farmers and if they get into the fields, we don’t get their help. There are times to avoid like wild turkey hunting season, too,” Peterson says. The timing also extends to time of day and day of the week. “We don’t burn on a weekend, because our volunteers want that time for themselves. We typically burn after 5 p.m. on a weekday evening. People get home from work and the wind is down at that time.

“A burn takes from 2 to 6 hours,” Peterson says. “You’re out there in the dark finishing up every time. You better have your flashlight after the fire goes out,” he says.

The Smithland Fire Department burns only for landowners within the fire district, unless they’re invited into another district by that fire department. “We get calls every year from people outside the district, but we only go to another district if we’re invited by that department,” Peterson says.

His department does cooperate with other fire departments, on land in each other's district. "We don't use just our people. Since our people aren't always available, we started 5 years ago to look for others who had time and wanted to participate. People from some of the other districts wanted to learn, and now they do more controlled burns in their districts. We help them and they help us," Peterson says.

The burn crews are usually 10 to 16 people, some from the Smithland department and some from neighboring departments. "You can count on getting an emergency call for assistance while you're on a controlled burn," Peterson says. "It happens to us two or three times a year. We're used to handling it, so it's not a big issue. Most of our people aren't out on the burn, so they're available. We also have mutual aid agreements with other departments, who can help handle those emergency calls.

There's no mandatory training for volunteers who help with controlled grass burns. "A few of us have S-130/190 training, but it's difficult enough for volunteers to take the EMT, structures, and other training they need. So they get this on the job," Peterson says. Peterson's been travelling west to fight wild fires since 2002, taking a 3-week tour each year.

Income from controlled burns and grants has helped the Smithland department purchase all the equipment needed for the burns and other fire fighting needs. The department has several grass rigs--four-wheel drive pickups with slide-in water tanks, pumps and hoses. They also have tankers with 2,000 to 3,000 gallons of extra water if needed. Other standard equipment on hand includes protective clothing, chain saws, brush cutters, fire brooms, drip torches and bladder bags (hand-pumped, collapsible backpack sprayer bags that can carry up to 5 gallons of water).

"The 50-50 match grants from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources have been really good grants for us," Peterson says. "I believe they now grant up to \$3500 for some of this equipment."

The controlled burn income comes in the form of donations and charged fees. "Not every landowner is in a government program that cost-shares for prescribed burns. So we ask for donations from those people, and charge for those who get cost-share for prescribed burns," Peterson says. "But we have a minimum. It's \$135 for the first 5 acres, and \$25 an acre after that, I believe."

"Other departments say they don't want to get involved with prescribed burns, and I just can't understand why they don't," Peterson says. "We've been able to stop all our other fundraisers now. None of us liked setup and cleanup after dance fundraisers. And we all thought we didn't want to be taking away from local churches with their fundraisers."

"The controlled burns are our sole source of income now," he continues. "A pancake breakfast in the past might only yield \$400 to \$800. But we get \$4,000 to \$8,000 every spring season from our burns. It's a lot better, we all think that."

And to Peterson, the look of the improved countryside is an important bonus. "I like the looks of the fields. They look totally different after a burn. It's well worth the effort."

Said like a true advocate.

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