Resolution #2020-05-21

RESOLUTION

USE OF GROWING SEASON PRESCRIBED FIRE AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL FOR WILD TURKEYS IN PINE FORESTS OF THE SOUTHEASTERN COASTAL PLAIN

WHEREAS: Wild turkey populations have been re-established in every Southeastern state through efforts by members of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA) and their partners; and

WHEREAS: Wild turkeys are recognized as an important species from an ecological, recreational, and economic standpoint and healthy wild turkey populations are a valued natural resource; and

WHEREAS: Studies have shown that nest success and poult survival are critical aspects of reproduction necessary for maintaining stable and growing wild turkey populations; and

WHEREAS: Quality nesting and brood rearing habitat are necessary to support successful wild turkey reproduction and robust populations; and

WHEREAS: Wild turkeys were historically abundant and evolved in fire-adapted communities that traditionally burned in the early growing season (April – June) from natural, lightning ignition sources; and

WHEREAS: Prescribed fire is a common management practice in coastal plain pine forests of the southeastern United States and is used for various vegetation management purposes, including creation and improvement of habitat for various wildlife species, including wild turkeys; and

WHEREAS: Use of prescribed fire during the growing season (~April – August; hereafter, growing season prescribed fire or GSPF) can be an effective and important tool for establishing vegetative conditions conducive to successful nesting and poult survival, namely open, herbaceous-dominated communities and reduced coverage of hardwood species, many of which cannot be effectively controlled by dormant season burning alone; and

WHEREAS: Land managers over recent decades have increasingly incorporated GSPF into management planning, which, due to the ground nesting behavior and precocial young of wild turkeys, has given rise to public concern for the welfare of wild turkeys when GSPF is conducted during periods of nesting and brood rearing; and

WHEREAS: A growing body of research indicates low rates of direct loss for nests (<5%) and broods exposed to GSPF; moreover, research indicates that most female wild turkeys select nest sites in areas that were burned within the previous 3 years; and

WHEREAS: Growing season fires are generally only prescribed in areas after three or more years have passed since burning, effectively reducing exposure of wild turkey nests to GSPF, and that any nest loss that does occur is partially mitigated by propensity of female turkeys to renest; and

WHEREAS: Female wild turkeys frequently select areas burned within the previous two years for brood rearing and such use is associated with increased poult survival; and

WHEREAS: We acknowledge that factors besides seasonality associated with prescribed fire influence vegetation response and wild turkey resource use and behavior, including frequency (burn return interval), scale (extent), and severity of burning.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies hereby advocates that member states:

1. Acknowledge that fire return intervals of $\leq$3 years and distributed in a mosaic pattern are an essential management practice needed to maintain and enhance habitat for wild turkeys throughout the upland pine forests of the southeastern coastal plain; and

2. Support use of GSPF as a tool for improving vegetation conditions in fire-adapted community types in the southeastern coastal plains for the benefit of wild turkeys, particularly where managers are unable to meet management objectives with dormant season prescribed fire alone; and

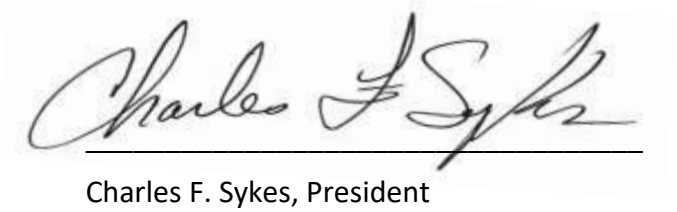
3. Urge caution in extensively using GSPF on a fire return interval $\leq$2 years because such application may pose risks to turkey nests and broods due to these stands being preferentially selected by females during the reproductive periods, recognizing, however, that such frequent application may be useful in the short-term on a limited basis for restoring overgrown, woody sites to more open, herbaceous, early successional community types and that such use would provide beneficial long-term effects for turkey populations and pose minimal long-term deleterious effects to wild turkeys during a brief community restoration period; and

4. Acknowledge that a growing body of research suggests prescribed fires, regardless of the season they occur, conducted at sizes which encompass an area representative of the majority of a wild turkey's average seasonal home range may alter space-use throughout the landscape in which they occur, and create conditions in which interior areas (>250 m from edges) of burns are subsequently avoided by wild turkeys for a period of time;

5. Acknowledge that managers must consider many other factors in the decision to use prescribed fire at any particular season, frequency and scale, including such factors as multiple species interests, weather, staffing and equipment, number of burn-days available, current vegetation condition, etc.; and

6. Conduct additional research to further the collective knowledge about the relationship between the timing, scale and frequency of prescribed fire and its impact on wild turkey population demographics.

Approved this the 21st day of May 2020, in an official meeting by the Board of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.



Charles F. Sykes, President