It was a humid day in 2010, and the smoke rose above the treetops. It had rained a few inches a couple of days before, but people were still out and about in the Graham Creek Nature Preserve—walking and biking along the trails, playing with their families on the playground, putting their canoes into Wolf Bay. They’d been using the park for a couple of years, but they had never seen a large plume of smoke in the air. Many panicked, thinking it was a wildfire that would tear through the Preserve, disrupting habitat, wildlife, and their neighborhood.

They didn’t know that was the day for the first controlled burn in the Preserve. After the City of Foley bought the land in 2004 for the valuable aquifer resources, it partnered with the Alabama Forestry Commission to promote conservation, education and passive recreational opportunities for the park.

The 484 acres had been used historically for row cropping and cattle pastures. It had been in rough shape sitting fallow for four or five years before the city bought it. Thanks in part to the humid climate and year-round growing season along the Gulf Coast in Alabama, the overgrown vegetation threatened the habitat for endangered species living in the Preserve. The Southeast leads the nation in prescribed burn acres on silvicultural land because of the rapid vegetation regrowth rate.

It also presented a fire risk for the surrounding communities, with their growing populations of young families, retirees and tourists. Many of them had grown up hearing that fire was always bad, and they reached out to Leslie Gahagan, the environmental manager for the City of Foley and manager of the Graham Creek Nature Preserve. “We heard concerns that fire would get away, that their homes would burn down, that wildlife would run out of the forest on fire,” Gahagan said. “These were actual things that the residents addressed in early community meetings.”

While it came as a surprise to many around the preserve, it had been carefully planned and organized for six months leading up to the day of the first controlled burn. Since they first surveyed the land, the Alabama Forestry Commission knew that the burn would be extremely technical and require specially trained people to do it effectively.

“We knew that we could not perform a controlled burn on this property without some outside resources,” said Rickey Fields, a forester for Baldwin County with...
the Alabama Forestry Commission, who manages the timber stand on the Graham Creek Nature Preserve. So, the Commission partnered with the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency and the Foley Fire Department to both focus on the burn and on fire suppression so it wouldn’t spread outside the preset parameters.

Manpower wasn’t the only challenge to a successful burn. It’s impossible to predict how much rain will fall or what direction the wind will blow two months ahead of time, which can make it hard to coordinate all the partners. “What we did was zero in on a week, looking at historical fire weather, picked a week and had to stick with it,” said Fields. Many were hesitant about the original date because of heavy rainfall in the preceding days, but the humidity and sun had dried the land out. “When we lit it, a lot of those skeptics quickly realized that rainfall was a blessing because it burned hot fast.”

That first prescribed burn covered about 300 acres - over half of the entire Preserve. Plans for that first prescribed fire and its smoke had concerned residents of the surrounding communities.

For six months before the first burn, Gahagan and others from the city and the Alabama Forestry Commission went door-to-door and attended meetings for local homeowners’ associations, city council and the planning commission to talk about the importance of fire, why it’s needed, why it’s a natural way to manage the preserve, and especially what happens after the burn. “Some of the residents’ biggest fears were about where the animals would go after the burn. We helped them realize that not everything burns to the ground, that the fires aren’t that hot, and that the animals need that fire for their habitat to be sustainable,” Gahagan said.

“After that first burn,” Gahagan said, “we never received another complaint. Some people were fearful that smoke would cause health problems for them.” Smoke-related impacts challenge the fire management community to implement management and response activities

“We heard concerns that fire would get away, that their homes would burn down, that wildlife would run out of the forest on fire.”

– Leslie Gahagan, Graham Creek Nature Preserve
safely. Gahagan said that, “they couldn’t even tell we’d burned because the Alabama Forestry Commission was so well-versed in that fire regime that none of the smoke ever landed on any homes.”

Gahagan and Fields are intentional and active in educating the community about what’s happening on the preserve, especially around prescribed fires. With many local, regional and national events and 3,000 to 4,000 local students coming on field trips every year to the Graham Creek Nature Preserve, Gahagan and her team take every opportunity they can to talk about the need for controlled burns and the benefits they provide for wildlife, the ecosystem, and the surrounding communities. The City of Foley also emails the presidents of each of the nearby homeowners’ associations ahead of each burn to make sure the public knows what’s happening and is engaged in the planning process.

Those burns are becoming somewhat frequent, as the vegetation grows quickly in the humid, sandy soil off the Gulf Coast. And wildland fires burn all 12 months of the year in the Southeast, stressing firefighting capacity and resources. “We try to keep a pretty aggressive burning regimen on the property,” Fields said. The Alabama Forestry Commission has operated under the Southeastern Region Cohesive Fire Strategy, which emphasizes restoring landscapes that need frequent fires to thrive, creating communities that withstand wildfire without loss of life and property, and developing effective wildfire management that reduces risk. “Since our initial burn, we have burned roughly every two years on average, but the first few burns were year-after-year just to keep the vegetation as minimal as we could.”

The sustainable and collaborative management of the Graham Creek Nature Preserve by the City of Foley and the Alabama Forestry Commission is ensuring that families, retirees and tourists will be able to walk, bike, canoe, play, and enjoy everything there is to offer there for generations to come. 

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**ALABAMA SUCCESS STORY**

**LOCATION**
Foley, Alabama

**STRATEGY**
To create cultural and community awareness of the benefits of prescribed fire for wildfire preparedness and land management.

**PARTNERS**
Graham Creek Nature Preserve
Alabama Forestry Commission
Alabama Law Enforcement Agency
Foley Fire Department
Foley City Council
Foley Planning Commission

*Fields serves as the liaison between the Alabama Forestry Commission, Graham Creek Nature Preserve and other government organizations and civic groups in Foley.*

*Fire is a critical part of managing the landscape here. It is a consistent challenge to educate the community on its importance.* — Rickey Fields, Alabama Forestry Commission