

Steve Creech – Indiana Fire Coordinator 1978-2003

Creech's first training with fire was in shipboard damage control while serving in the U.S. Navy. After college he worked for International Paper Company in Mississippi. The use of fire as a forest management tool was just a way of life in the management of southern pine timber. Fire was utilized for site preparation prior to planting, for the removal of logging slash after a harvest, for wildlife management, and for hazardous fuels reduction. International Paper was also responsible for fire suppression on the lands they managed.

In 1975, Creech returned to Indiana as a District Forester with the Division of Forestry, working out of the Greencastle office in Boone, Hendricks, and Marion County. While serving as a district forester he joined the Madison Township Volunteer Fire Department in Greencastle. There he learned much about structural fire fighting techniques.

In 1977 Creech was asked to serve as part of an Indiana Wildland Fire Crew. This was only the second year, Indiana crews were organized to help at the national level. His crew was sent to California in mid-August. The fires he encountered during that two-week period helped mold the remainder of his forestry career. The next year he was selected to fill the position of Fire Coordinator.

Creech reflects on some of the defining changes that have affected the fire organization during his watch as coordinator.

When Creech took over the fire program the state was just beginning to utilize fire as a management tool. The Division of Fish and Wildlife had begun to use prescribed fire to help maintain open grasslands and brush, killing off the invading trees. The Division of Nature Preserves had done some pioneering work in managing their natural areas through the reintroduction of fire.

Though in the 1970's, using fire as a management tool was revolutionary, Creech emphasizes the use of fire in Indiana is not a new concept. Historically, Native American cultures utilized fire for a variety of reasons. The native cultures had a good understanding of the "cause and effect" of fire. They knew for example, that fire would help maintain grasses over woody stems. They also knew that wildlife species, particularly those they depended on for food, required young, early succession vegetation to prosper. We now know native cultures probably used fire during both the Fall and Spring seasons. Over time, the ecosystems that evolved in Indiana were those that either thrived on fire or were tolerant of frequent burning.

Early white settlers brought a very different fire culture to America. Fire in their eyes was a tool to clear land. Fire removed residual stumps and logging debris. It was also local custom to burn the woods to rid the area of ticks and snakes. This periodic burning, coupled with grazing and poor management practices helped establish the beautiful red and white oak stands we have today.

With the increased use of prescribed fire in the 1990s came the need to develop rules and regulations for the practitioner. The Yellowstone Fires of 1988 was a wake-up call for land managers. Although the Yellowstone Complex was a series of fires, some natural (lightning caused) and some human caused, it forced all land management agencies to reexamine their fire programs. Indiana was no exception.

In 1996 a policy was developed governing both fire suppression and prescribed fire use. These new rules provided the sidebars necessary to safely utilize fire and to minimize

risks. Standards were established for training, personal protective equipment and physical fitness. When the South Canyon Fire in Colorado claimed the lives of 14 fire fighters every state re-examined their programs and made necessary adjustments.

The new millennium started out with grim reminders that fire management is a risky business. New Mexico's escaped prescribe burn which became the Cero Grande Fire of May 2000, threatened to burn the Los Alamos Nuclear Testing Lab and the Thirty Mile Fire, August 2001, in Oregon claimed the lives of another 4 firefighters. With each incident, fire managers look at the lessons learned and how they can strengthen their own program.

Creech also notes, as the use of prescribed fire in land management became more accepted in Indiana, other agencies became involved. The newly formed Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM) was charged with monitoring air quality throughout Indiana. IDEM provided exemptions for most prescribed burning including the use on farms (90 percent) and that done by various natural resource management agencies. The exemptions are given since most prescribed burns are conducted under very specific weather conditions. These conditions favor hotter fires, more complete combustion and reduced particulate matter.

The 1980s saw a rapid rise in the number of rural and volunteer fire departments across Indiana. As the rural areas developed there was a need for fire fighting resources to protect scattered properties and homes. A few of these new departments had a tax base for support. Others were simply a group of dedicated neighbors that banded together to help one another. With little money, most relied on volunteers for staffing, and were badly in need of training and equipment.

Even on state forest property, Creech said most properties now rely on local rural and volunteer fire departments for fire suppression. Before the last decade, every state forest property had a fire vehicle that was maintained ready for action year round and a crew trained in fire suppression. Now the only use for these old relics is to wash down building and toilets.

When the DNR first started sending fire fighters to other states to assist nationally, they could fill those positions with DNR employees. Now crews sent out of state are composed of cooperators from the rural and volunteer fire service and local individuals.

Creech also marvels at the significant change in fire technology. Twenty years ago, prescribed burns were done with little modern technology. Today fire managers have all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), portable radios, power blowers, Geographic Information System maps, and Global Positioning Systems to help with the task. Creech said IDNR has always prided themselves on being a "science-based" division. In fire management, personnel maintain high standards for continuing education and required certifications.

During Creech's tenure, the Division of Forestry's Fire Management Program has achieved national recognition. Their program is one other states have emulated, and is constantly being improved. Creech notes that he has "had the honor to work with some of the most dedicated individuals anywhere on this planet. We have forged interagency teams that draw on each other's strengths without concern for who gets the credit. Our adoption of the Incident Command System has allowed us to work side-by-side with cooperators on all types of disasters, not just fire. Our personnel have worked floods, ice storms, tornados and terrorist acts in nearly all fifty states.

Creech reflects that the future of fire management is somewhat cloudy, “As a nation we have asked the rural and volunteer fire service for too much. We have asked them to protect our homes, and to make medical and rescue runs, but we don’t want to pay them for their service. We ask them to instead hold ice cream socials, bean suppers and fish fries to pay for their safety equipment, insurance and apparatus. We expect them to have the most current training, but again balk at funding this required training.” Creech believes there will soon be a move to paid fire departments.

Another concern Creech voices is that as we are seeing more of our decisions as natural resource professionals becoming political decisions. He notes, “Fire as a management tool is a risky business and will probably fall prey to lawyers, risk managers, and politics. Now we are beginning to see that decisions are based on political demands even when these decisions fly in the face of science.”

“Perhaps the person who writes about the second 100 years of forestry in Indiana will have seen these dilemmas come full circle” Creech speculates. He asserts, “Fire has been a natural part of our ecosystem for millions of years. If we are going to be able to manage the various ecosystems found in Indiana we need to maintain the ability to utilize fire as a management tool.”