

Graham Creek Nature Preserve

Benefits Beyond Forest Stewardship & Ecosystem Preservation

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The Graham Creek Nature Preserve was purchased in 2004 by the City of Foley in Baldwin County for valuable aquifer resources located within the 484 acres. City employees soon discovered within this property an amazing pine savanna ecosystem with rare plants and animals. By 2008, a master plan had been developed to promote conservation of these natural resources, while offering the public educational and passive recreational opportunities. Following the advice of local botanists and wetland scientists, a strategy for habitat management was developed to include removal of exotic, invasive plants, as well as the introduction of prescribed fire.

The Alabama Forestry Commission partnered with the City of Foley in 2010 to help improve the Graham Creek Nature Preserve through sound stewardship practices. The goals of the Nature Preserve were twofold. One was habitat management for minimization of undergrowth for the enhancement of native fire-dependent species, which in turn showed an increase in native wildlife. Approximately 300 acres of pine savanna and pine forest habitat have been burned. There are now extensive populations of rare plants including white top pitcher plants, purple pitcher plants, shortleaf rose gentian, grass pink orchids, yellow butterwort,

crested fringed orchids, rush featherling, and bog buttons. Since the introduction of fire, populations of turkey, dove, and quail have also been documented.

The Nature Preserve's other goal was aesthetics and education, as this is a park area. Visitors learn the benefits of prescribed fire through educational signage as well as visibly seeing the positive results of the burns with flowering plants. Neighboring communities have also received valuable education on the benefits of these burns to minimize the risk of wildfire.

Meanwhile, although the main objective was to improve the delicate pine savanna ecosystem within the Nature Preserve, the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC) saw greater benefits beyond simply improving the native ecosystem. The agency envisioned more than implementing a prescribed burning regimen and non-native plant species eradication. In addition to the opportunity to educate the surrounding communities, Graham Creek was the perfect area to train alongside other state and city first responders.

Centered between three large subdivisions and an 18-hole golf course, Graham Creek Nature Preserve is two miles north of the densely populated city of Orange Beach. The Nature Preserve assists in educating the community in several different aspects. It helps the AFC demonstrate the strategies of wildland fire prevention in an area that has witnessed an increased amount of urban sprawl in recent years, as well as stress the importance of implementing Wildland Urban Interface activities in the surrounding communities.

Just a few years ago, when we first implemented the prescribed burning regimen at Graham Creek Nature Preserve, we witnessed firsthand the local population trembling in fear when they saw plumes of smoke rising into the air. Now that we have been able to educate the public as to why we are conducting these burns, the local community embraces our efforts and is extremely grateful for our wildfire prevention activities. The Nature Preserve has allowed us to conduct several field trips for area schools both during and after prescribed burns. It's an awesome feeling to load kids onto a tour trailer and allow them to watch in awe as we conduct a prescribed burn right in front of their eyes. We are providing memories these kids will have for years!

Graham Creek has also given the Forestry Commission an opportunity to train not only our own personnel, but also the City of Foley Fire Department and the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency (ALEA) in readiness for large scale wildfires and other natural disasters. We use prescribed burning activities as a source of real-life training opportunities to be better prepared when the next natural disaster impacts this area. It allows ALEA helicopter pilots to practice making water drops with the 'Bambi' bucket so they are more experienced for future wildland fire suppression activities. It also provides AFC personnel the chance to train and educate our local structural firefighters on wildland fire suppression techniques.

In essence, the Graham Creek Nature Preserve allows for several state and local agencies to train together. These training activities have greatly improved cohesion between separate first responder entities that will now be able to work together much more efficiently and effectively when the next inevitable natural disaster impacts our great State of Alabama. ☘