

WIBW Radio Interview with Karl Brooks on Flint Hills Prairie Burning

[Kelly Lenz] And it's nine minutes now past six. This is Ag Issues here on 580 radio WIBW. Good morning everyone, I'm Kelly Lenz – and this morning on the program we're going to look at an issue that is very important, I think, especially for eastern Kansas ranchers in the Flint Hills and that is the Flint Hills smoke management plan. We've talked about this several times on the program as that plan was being put together and implemented this year. Well, we've now made it through one burning season with the Flint Hills smoke management plan. How well did it work out, where might the plan go from here, and there was a recent article in The Wall Street Journal about the plan. Was it fair, did the Journal do a good job of covering the issue and representing everybody involved? We have two guests this morning joining us in studio – Karl Brooks, he is the Region 7 EPA Administrator. Karl, good morning. Glad to have you with us.

[Karl Brooks] Kelly, it's great to be back. Thanks for having me.

[Kelly Lenz] I think this is the third time we've had you on the show.

[Karl Brooks] At least third, maybe more.

[Kelly Lenz] Alright, and by the way, I know you're going to be involved with us in the Flint Hills Beef Fest Seminar again this year – by request, I might add.

[Karl Brooks] Hey, I was happy to be there last time – really enjoyed it.

[Kelly Lenz] OK , anyway Karl Brooks joining us in studio. Joining us by phone is Jeff Davidson. Jeff is the Greenwood County extension agent, one of the many counties involved in the Flint Hills smoke management plan. Jeff, good morning, glad to have you with us.

[Jeff Davidson] Yes, good morning Kelly. Good to be here, nice day.

[Kelly Lenz] It is, it's a beautiful day – everybody should enjoy it. Karl, let's go to you first, and I want to talk about the article that was in The Wall Street Journal report or Wall Street Journal. Many people that listen to this program know we talked a lot about this Flint Hills smoke management plan as it was put together, as it was implemented, and they may know what the plan is all about. Obviously, it's to make sure that we can keep air quality good in some of our major cities, Kansas City and Wichita especially. So the plan was put together. Wall Street Journal did this article on it recently. First, your reaction to the article. Was it fair?

[Karl Brooks] Well, first off, let me say anytime that the Wall Street Journal writes about the Flint Hills that's a plus for us here in Region 7. I mean, it's a huge important part of the beef industry so probably any publicity is good publicity. The article probably could've been a little bit more accurate about the work that had been done by the ranching community, ag extension, K-State and EPA. It came across a little bit like a sort of dollars and cents thing, instead of what seemed to us over at EPA like a really good effort to try to solve a common problem. It didn't really pick up on the common problem solving as well I thought it could have.

[Kelly Lenz] Did it reflect – because I didn't read the article, I read excerpts of it – did it reflect the fact that the Flint Hills smoke management plan was really a collaborative effort between all the parties involved? We're talking cities, we're talking the ranching industry, major ag groups and the EPA. Didn't reflect that?

[Karl Brooks] That did not really come through at all and, in fact, to me that's the big part of the story. You know, EPA kind of came into this thing in early 2010 with a fair bit of criticism of the Agency for what we were doing and what we were proposing to do. I think we came through the process having a much better understanding of where ranchers in the Flint Hills come from. We had a much better understanding of the ecology and economics behind burning, and we're hopeful that this system is only going to get better. It's a first year out like you said, we've got a lot of lessons learned to try to put together a better plan for 2012.

[Kelly Lenz] Jeff Davidson, did you read the article and what did you think of it?

[Jeff Davidson] Uh, yes I did read the article and I think I'll just sort of second what Karl said there, you know. It's an article that just tries to accentuate, I think, some differences, you know the title of it is "Ranch Fires Ignite Dispute." It refers here to the Flint Hills fights, and it refers to the Kansas range fire fight, you know, rather than the collaborative effort that really happened. So, it just sort of the way he used his words to make it look like much more of a conflict than what it really was.

[Kelly Lenz] Yeah, words are powerful and they can be especially damaging when they misrepresent an issue, and it sounds to me like that's probably what they did here. OK Karl, from your perspective there was a lot of time, I mean months and months of the various groups that I just described working together, putting this plan together. We've gone through one season now. I know we had some spikes in the air quality in Wichita and maybe in Kansas City. But given all that, how well did the plan work out?

[Karl Brooks] I thought from our standpoint at EPA it worked out very well. One of the best parts about it was the public education part. We emphasized right from the beginning that this was not a regulatory approach. In other words, EPA wasn't going to go in and license ranchers on when they could burn and when not. Instead, it was an effort to try to give managers the information they needed about weather, about air quality, about other burning plans, so that they can make good decisions on their own ground. And that part of it worked really well. I mean, certainly we can do a better job of getting more information out easier, you know, online services and things. But the part about getting information out and getting people to use that information when they made their spring burn plans, that worked very well.

[Kelly Lenz] Jeff Davidson, you were in the trenches on this one – pardon me for saying that – but you're a county extension agent. You work directly with beef producers down in Greenwood County. How did they feel about the plan and do you feel that they adequately participated in the plan in the way that Karl described, that much more conscious now of where the smoke is going, who's going to be impacted by it?

[Jeff Davidson] Yes, I was actually very pleased with the ranchers that I talked with and their response to it. They did use the smoke modeling tool on the website – at least many of them did, you know, not everybody did – but especially the guys that burn the larger acreages, those are the guys I was really checking with and they did use this information. Actually, you know, it's to some degree it wasn't particularly new to them. We've been talking about smoke and I just trying to burn on days when the smoke's not going towards Kansas City. We've actually talked about that now for, I don't know, several years, but it's really brought to the forefront of course this year. But no, I thought the ranching community received this very well. I was pleased with the guys I talked to. They were responsive to it and, you know, tried to do what needed to be done to minimize the smoke issue.

[Kelly Lenz] One of the things that, despite our best efforts, we probably can't get away from is the fact that there is going to be a fair amount of burning in a relatively short period of time. This year in the month of April, the bulk of the burning was probably done what, in two days, Jeff?

[Jeff Davidson] Oh, we had a big day – I believe it was the 5th of April – and we had another one right there in the middle, 12th or 13th of April.

[Kelly Lenz] It was the 13th because I was out in the quails at that time.

[Jeff Davidson] OK, that was the day then. Those were, I think, our biggest days. But we actually did burn a little bit on, I think there was like four days – I didn't bring my burn log here with me – but I think it was about four days in April that we did not burn. Now, some of the days we just burned a few acres, but we did burn on just about every day in April. So to a big degree, we had it spread out about as much as you can ask for. But you know, when you get a good day and our guys did burn on the good days, they were not – the smoke modeling tool has a red day, which means don't burn and our guys were burning on the green days, green or yellow – green means go or burn, yellow being kind of a decision day, and red being a day when you should not burn – but our guys were burning on the green for the most part, a few of the yellow days as well.

[Kelly Lenz] Very good, Jeff you hold on. Karl Brooks, EPA regional administrator, you hold on. And we're going to be back. This is Ag Issues on 580 radio WIBW. We'll return in a moment.

[Kelly Lenz] And welcome back to the program this morning. Two guests: Karl Brooks, regional EPA administrator, joining us in studio and joining us by phone this morning, Jeff Davidson. He is the Greenwood County extension agent – Greenwood County, one of a number of counties directly involved in the Flint Hills smoke management plan this year. Of course, now that plan moves forward. Karl Brooks, where do you go from here on the plan? You've had an opportunity to see now, for one season, how well it's worked. Are we going to see some tweaking on this? Where are we going to go?

[Karl Brooks] Yeah, I'd say in some ways the main way we go is to go back to what's worked for us before, and that is a lot of listening and a lot of learning. Guys like Jeff, who are out in the field, are going to be providing guidance to ranchers. We're going to have a couple of different sessions this summer and then especially again in the winter coming up where we're going to try to tailor this, pick up the data that we've learned, try to figure out so where does the data match up with what on the ground

practices were. And since this is just a first year that we have, we've got other years to try to improve this. I'm convinced that we have not hit the optimum yet, that this is still a plan that's got a lot of upside to it.

[Kelly Lenz] Jeff Davidson, your take on what Karl just said.

[Jeff Davidson] Yeah, I agree, I think we're just going to keep fine tuning a little bit. We've got this website that I'm quite impressed with and the K-State extension host, besides some open technology, is doing the actual modeling on it that shows where your smoke is going to go downwind. There is a few things that happened that kind of tweaked things. The FSA (Farm Service Agency) has extended the period for burning our conservation reserve program acres into the summer farther, so we're able to spread that time frame out. And we just continue to have our K-State prescribed burning workshops, which I've been holding here for several years, so we'll keep educating ranchers from that standpoint – and I say ranchers, we have other groups that come there too - wildlife and parks clientele or personnel come there to those meetings as well. So we continue doing what we've been doing, plus just kind of tweaking that a little bit.

[Kelly Lenz] Alright, Jeff and Karl, I think both of us know that this whole process is actually going to get harder as we move along. The reason is because EPA is looking at new air quality standards for ozone and particulate matter and those are the very things that we're seeing the spikes on now, right Karl? I've seen where new standard is. It's quite a bit lower than the current standard. If we're having a tough time meeting the current standard, how are we going to meet a new lower standard and when might that standard change?

[Karl Brooks] Well, let me be clear about one thing: The new standard has not yet been adopted by EPA. It's in the hands of the Administrator right now, so there've been a variety of proposals made. There's nothing final yet. That'll happen later this summer, so we're not totally sure. Yeah, I mean there's no doubt that everybody in the cities or in the countryside is probably going to have to take another look at some of the practices that they've been doing for a long, long time. I mean, places like Kansas City or Wichita, there's millions of people living there – so definitely what they do is going to have a much bigger impact on ozone in metro Kansas City than what, let's say, a relative handful of ranchers do out in the Flint Hills. Yeah, I'd say that the bar is probably going to be inched a little bit higher for everybody involved in this, which is a good reason why I'm really glad that EPA and the ranching community got into this early so that we're not acting in some kind of crisis atmosphere. Instead we're, like Jeff, said we're tweaking, we're problem solving. That's the way that we need to be going.

[Kelly Lenz] Alright, is Jeff is this your first experience working with folks like Karl? EPA, and you and I think both know, generally speaking the EPA doesn't generally get Christmas cards from people in agriculture. It's an agency that, you know, I think sometimes is misunderstood but also is not well looked at by the agriculture community. Has this whole process impressed you where they're not coming in with the strong arm approach?

[Jeff Davidson] Yes, I mean, this has been actually a kind of fun group to work with. It has not been an adversarial thing really at all. KDHE and EPA have both been very good to work with. I think they

understand why we have our prescribed fires out here on our Flint Hills. So no, they've been very good to work with. It's really not my first time to work with them, but it's certainly the most intense or the most inclusive, you know, group. So yeah, it's been good and I think some kind of eye opening from everybody's standpoint. I think the ranchers that sat at the table would say the same thing, that they got along fine and sort of an eye-opening thing for everybody sitting around the table.

[Kelly Lenz] Jeff, one more question to you and we're going to have to wrap it up. You mentioned most of the ranchers pretty active in looking at the program, how it should work, what they need to do, what they need to be aware of before they burn native grass. How do we bring the rest of them in?

[Jeff Davidson] Well, I just think keep doing what we're doing. You know, we just write articles, we've had some radio programs such as this morning and we just keep talking and rancher-to-rancher communication and we've had some of that as well, and keep having our K-State prescribed fire schools. I think that's just how we keep doing it, just by talking and bringing programs out there, you bet.

[Kelly Lenz] Jeff, a real delight to have you with us on the program. Thanks for the great work that you do and your cohorts do in the Flint Hills region and working with ranchers and helping them through issues like this. Karl Brooks, regional administrator of the EPA, it's always good to have you on the program. And we'll see you at the Flint Hills Beef Fest.

[Karl Brooks] I will be there. I'll probably see Jeff, too. Tip of the cap, Jeff, for all your work on this.

[Jeff Davidson] Well, thank you, Karl – and yes, you were there last year and did a very good job and so I'm looking forward to that.

[Kelly Lenz] Maybe we can liven the program up a bit this year. What do you think?

[laughter]

[Karl Brooks] I'll look forward to it whether it's lively or not.

[Kelly Lenz] Wear your thick shirt, Karl. At any rate, Jeff, thanks for being with us this morning from Greenwood County. Karl Brooks, thanks for joining us in studio. This has been our Ag Issues program. An open line show coming up tomorrow. Stay tuned, we'll be back.