



PAUL GLEASON LEAD BY EXAMPLE AWARD Lifetime Achievement

Jim Karels
2019



DUTY • RESPECT • INTEGRITY



- **MENTORING AND TEAMWORK**
Developing others for the future and building the team.
- **MOTIVATION AND VISION**
Providing Inspired Vision and Clear Intent
- **INITIATIVE AND INNOVATION**
Executing outstanding Initiative providing vision

Jim Karels is a man of vision and action. His leadership attributes are not only evident to the citizens he serves but also to those who serve with him, both within his organization and throughout the wildland fire service.

Jim has more than 38 years of experience in prescribed burning, wildfire suppression and land management throughout the United States. A native of rural western Minnesota, or the "Prairie Pothole Region," Jim grew up loving the outdoors. After graduating with a degree in Forest Management from the University of Minnesota, he traveled west with the U.S. Forest Service and eventually made his way to Florida. Jim and his wife, Debbie, have lived in Tallahassee for over 30 years and enjoy spending time outdoors. They have two adult sons, Joe and Ben, who have grown up helping Jim prescribe burn numerous properties, including their own land.

In addition to family hunting and fishing adventures, Jim oversees Operation Outdoor Freedom, a program that provides recreational and rehabilitative opportunities to wounded veterans on state forests, agricultural lands and private lands throughout Florida. Co-founding the program in 2009, he believes the program is one way to honor and give back to the men and women who serve our country and deserve our utmost respect.

Jim is a national leader in both prescribed fire and wildfire management. He is the former president of the National Association of State Foresters (NASF) and is currently representing all 50 states as the NASF Fire Committee Chair. Jim also serves on other national committees including the Wildland Fire Leadership Council and the Wildland Fire Executive Council to provide support for the implementation and coordination of the National Fire Management Program in the United States. Karels is committed to developing quality incident management teams (IMTs). His support of training (S-420 and CIMC) and

a philosophy of leadership at all levels, Florida Forest Service sustains four IMTs that are now deploying on Type 1 incidents around the nation.

While prescribed fire is one of the most valuable land management tools to reduce wildfire threats and to restore forest health, Jim believes people are the key. Developing partnerships before a disaster hits is critical. He believes working together to effectively educate landowners and the public can preserve our burning heritage which will ultimately preserve our forested ecosystems, enhance our wildlife and protect our citizens.

In October 2018, Hurricane Michael destroyed over 2.8 million acres of forestland across an 80-mile swath in the Florida Panhandle before making its way through Georgia and Alabama. Impacting more than 16,000 landowners in Florida alone, Jim initiated the inclusion of forestry in the \$19.1 billion Emergency Disaster Appropriations Bill that passed in June 2019, an accomplishment made more notable by the fact that forestry has never been included in federal disaster aid funding for landowners. Having led the charge on this historic achievement, Jim is now serving as a guiding force in the development of implementation plans with the USDA—efforts that focus on helping non-industrial forest landowners in the aftermath of the Category 5 storm and that will help restore Florida's top agricultural commodity.

On June 11, 2011, Jim did what no leader wants to do—he led his fire family through the line-of-duty deaths of fellow firefighters, Joshua Burch and Brett Fulton. Following the tragedy, Jim became the driving force behind the development of the Blue Ribbon Staff Ride to ensure lessons were available to all members of the wildland fire service.

Drawing upon his experience, Jim's authentic leadership style became front and center in 2013 as he led the Yarnell Hill Fire Fatality Investigation. In doing so, Jim demonstrated his leadership priorities both professionally and personally.

Jim is a strong proponent of leadership development and the Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program. As Karels says, "Leadership comes with great responsibility, and I take that seriously and personally. In my position, lives and livelihoods are at stake every day. Whether it's wildfire response or land management, there are real people, real families, and real stories in every facet of what we do. From the employees of the Florida Forest Service to the landowners and public citizens we serve and protect, it is my responsibility to ensure they are safe and that our forest resources are stewarded wisely for future generations."