

## Butler Chief defends decision to not allow department to respond to woods fires

By Tommy Campbell  
The Choctaw Sun

**BUTLER** — The subject of woodland fires became a hot topic at last week's meeting of the Choctaw Co. Association of Volunteer Fire Departments as tempers flared over one department's decision to not allow its members to fight that type of blaze.

Butler Fire Chief Max Edwards, Jr., said at the March 9th meeting that he has taken a lot of criticism for a decision he made to pull Butler firefighters off a recent fire in the Brightwater community.

"Not one piece of our equipment can get off the road and into the woods, not one," Edwards said. "It isn't made to fight that type of fire. We just don't have equipment to fight woods fires with."

In regard to that particular fire, Edwards said he made the decision because there were at least two or three other departments already on the scene.

"If we had a house fire in Butler, there wouldn't have been anybody left here to go and fight it!" he said. "We couldn't have responded to a church, or business fire either. We were stretched too thin and I will tell anybody that, yes, I made that call, so if anybody wants to know who did it, you tell 'em Chief Edwards did. If they want to be mad, they can just be mad. My job is to make sure that houses, churches, businesses and people are protected, not woods."

Edwards said the department's bylaws allow the department to go to grass fires in their district only if a structure is in imminent danger.

Members from several departments commented that at least two houses and Brightwater United Methodist Church were all in direct

danger from the fire, which spread quickly over a wide area, and that they needed the additional help.

"The taxes paid by the people of this county bought that equipment you talk about," one firefighter said. "Are you saying that your department is better than any of the rest of us?"

Edwards said that his department has never failed to respond to a call in which a home, church, school, business or other structure was jeopardized by fire, and had often gone to opposite ends of the county to assist other departments on many occasions.

"And I will help you in the future in any way I can, but I will say again, I do not have the equipment or the manpower to go off the road and into the woods to fight that type of fire," he said.

Edwards said that when a department commits itself to fighting a fire for which it is not properly trained or equipped to handle, it not only puts firefighters' lives at risk, and could also have legal repercussions as well.

Earlier in the meeting, Butler Mayor Ben Smith had also brought up the topic of grass and brush fires, and asked what can be done to convince people to not burn yard debris when conditions are dry and windy.

"We had four brush fires in Butler in one day last week," he said. "That's wrong. People ought to have better sense and stop and think about what they are doing before they start a fire."

Forester Chuck Quinn, with the Alabama Forestry Commission, said there are specific state laws that deal with unauthorized burning, but added that the city may also have some leeway and authority to set local policy

regarding outdoor burning.

"There should be a fine and a charge if they burn when people are plainly told, 'don't burn'," Smith said. "You firefighters are all volunteers, none of you get paid for this, and you shouldn't have to spend your time and jeopardize your lives and equipment by fighting grass fires that were caused by some careless person just wanting to burn off a field or pile of brush when they knew doggone well they shouldn't."

Quinn said that unlawful burning of debris is a misdemeanor which usually carries a warning citation for a first offense.

"But we can write tickets, even for a first offense," he said. "If it gets to be habitual, there can be some really heavy penalties."

Also, if a person allows an outside fire to get out of control and it damages or destroys another's property, the perpetrator can be held financially responsible in a court of law for the dollar amount of those damages. In addition — in some instances — criminal charges could also be filed.

Johnny Alberson, who is a member of the Butler VFD and is also serving his second term as President of the Alabama Association of Volunteer Firefighters, said that it is a statewide problem.

"I just think its wrong to continue to let people get away with this," Smith said.

Smith said he would like to research the law and see what can be done at the local level to try and curb some of the unauthorized burning.

"I think the problem is extremely serious and needs to be addressed countywide, and not just by the Town of Butler," he said.

## Sun Country Calendar

*There is no charge to list an upcoming non-profit or charitable event for your church, school, civic group, fire department, etc. Meetings of governmental entities may also be included. Send your announcement as far in advance as possible. Calendar items may be mailed, faxed, emailed, delivered in person to our offices in Butler or Gilbertown, or left in our drop box at The Country Corner in Butler.*

**Fri. March 16th and Sat. March 17th**  
**BENEFIT FISH FRY FOR BETTY EZELL** at Jeanette Lott's home, Yantley, beginning at 4 p.m. on Friday and noon on Saturday. All proceeds will go to help Mrs. Ezell with some unexpected expenses. For more information call 205-398-7002.

**Fri., March 16th — Sun., March 18th**  
**WEEKEND REVIVAL, SINGING, HOME-COMING**, Wimberly Methodist Protestant Church, Friday night (7 p.m.) Rev. James "Skippy" Gates; Saturday night (7 p.m.), the world-famous Sullivan Family from St. Stephens will be singing, with refreshments served afterward; Sunday morning will be Homecoming with dinner following the service.

**DANCE**, sponsored by Choctaw Community Development Center, 8 p.m. - 11:45 p.m., old East Choctaw School on Ala. 10 East. Admission \$5.

**Saturday, March 17th**  
**BENEFIT PROGRAM** for Akeria and Janae Williams and Jeanifer Monghan, New Mt. Mariah M.B. Church, Nanafalia, 6:30 p.m. Rev. Alphonso Bowen, Pastor.

**Sunday, March 18th**  
**FRIENDS AND FAMILY DAY**, Calvary Baptist Church, Pickens Avenue, Butler. Fellowship will begin at 9:30 a.m. with coffee in the fellowship hall, Sunday School at 10 a.m. and worship service at 11 a.m.

**BENEFIT PROGRAM** for J.L. Cunningham, 7 p.m., Pleasant Chapel Baptist Church of Silas. Rev. Bobby Ray Bolton, Pastor.

**A CELEBRATION OF LOVE** for Minister Pierre McGrew, 3 p.m., Greater C&J Holiness Church, Millry. Guest speaker Rev. Claude Jordon of Mathersville, MS. The Pastor is Apostle J.E. Johnson.

**CCHS CLASS OF 1978 REUNION MEETING**, Ezell's Fish Camp, 5 p.m. All interested classmates are urged to attend. For more information contact Sylvia Bunn Thomas at 205-398-3966 or by email at sbthomas@tds.net or Gladys Bishop Eddie at 398-2106.

**NOTE-BURNING CEREMONY**, Heritage Church of God, Gilbertown. Guest speaker, Tim Brown.

**WOMEN'S DAY PROGRAM**, Mt. Olive Baptist Church, Butler, 1:30 p.m. Rev. Cleo McGrew Sr., Pastor.

**WOMEN'S DAY PROGRAM**, Wahalak Missionary Baptist Church, Butler, 11:30 a.m. Sis. Stephanie Steele will talk and Pastor James T. Steele will do the sermon.

**Monday, March 19th**  
**FAMILY MATH NIGHT, PTO MEETING**, Southern Choctaw Elementary, for grades 3-6, from 5 until 6 p.m. in the cafeteria. For more information contact SCES at 843-2461. The PTO meeting will follow in the gym at 6 p.m.

**Tuesday, March 20th**  
**CHOCTAW CO. BAPTIST ASSOCIATION** Vacation Bible School Clinic, Toxey Baptist Church, 7-8:30 p.m.

**OPERATION CLEAN SWEEP** planning meeting, 7 p.m., Gilbertown Town Hall.

**Fri., March 23rd - Sun., March 25th**  
**TWO-NIGHT REVIVAL**, 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday, culminating at 11 a.m. Sunday. W.A.V.E. Ministries/Vision Church, Butler Civic Center. For more information contact Mia (Grice) Wilkes, Pastor and Overseer at 251-406-2499.

**Sat., March 24 - Sun., March 25**  
**CHOIR ANNIVERSARY**, Salem Baptist Church, 2 p.m. Choirs or groups are asked for two songs. Guest speaker for Sunday — Min. Chris Holcombe, Pastor of New Beginning Holiness Church in Meridian, MS.

**Saturday, March 24th**  
**BENEFIT**, Pleasant Hill Vol. Fire Dept., fish and chicken plates served from 10:30 a.m. - 3 p.m. Boston Butts also available. To place an order see any fireman or call 205-459-3228.

**ST. MARK C.M.E. CHURCH** will have a rummage sale and fish fry at the church in Lisman on Ala. Hwy. 10 at 10 a.m. Marjorie Bonds, Pastor.

**Sunday, March 25th**  
**APPRECIATION PROGRAM** for The Silver-tones of Silas, 5 p.m., Shady Grove Missionary Baptist Church, Silas. Rev. T.L. Ware, Pastor.

**STEWARDS AND DEACONS PROGRAM**, Shiloh C.M.E. Church, Cromwell, 2 p.m. Guest speaker Rev. Charles Paul of Troy, NY. Rev. Larry Williams, Pastor.

**STEWARDESS PROGRAM**, Fairfield C.M.E. Church, Halsell 2 p.m. Guest minister Rev. Oscar EVENING TEA WORSHIP, Wesley United Methodist Church, 4 p.m., Ararat Road. Guest speaker: Minister Shirley Williams.

**Friday, March 30th**  
**SOUTHERN CHOCTAW ELEMENTARY** will hold registration for Kindergarten and students in other grades who are transferring from other schools in the fall.

**Saturday, March 31st**  
**COUNTYWIDE "CLEAN SWEEP" DAY!** All churches, fire departments, schools, civic groups, businesses and individuals are encouraged to organize a "clean up" effort in your own neighborhood, 8 a.m. til noon (or whatever time you or your group can work). Call The Choctaw Sun to "register" your group's involvement so that "before and after" photos can be made of your area. If you cannot clean up on this day, any day during the week before or the week after will be fine. Dumpsters or trucks will be provided free of charge at select locations around the county for collecting and disposing bags of trash on Saturday. For more information, call Tommy at 251-843-6397.

**CRITTER DINNER**, meal and live entertainment, 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. Butler Senior Citizens Center, Riderwood Drive.



Choctaw Sun photo by Tommy Campbell

Probate Judge D'Wayne May, along with Commissioners Dandy Brown, C.D. "Budd" Ruffin, Clyde Dixon and Henry Lovette are shown here on Monday of this week signing a proclamation designating Saturday, March 31st as "Operation Clean Sweep Day" in Choctaw County. The proclamation encourages local residents to get out and help pick up litter in their communities on that day or any day of the week before or the week after.

## Judge, Commissioners unanimously endorse "Operation Clean Sweep"

By Tommy Campbell  
The Choctaw Sun

**BUTLER** — Members of the Choctaw County Commission on Monday gave their blessing to "Operation Clean Sweep", a countywide litter clean-up day set for Saturday, March 31st, and signed a proclamation asking all citizens to take part in the volunteer effort.

The event began after a grass-roots movement began among citizens from all across the county who said they were tired of the trashy, littered appearance of the county's roadsides and wanted to do something to help clean it up in time for Easter.

At the March 12th meeting of the Commission, Probate Judge D'Wayne May, and Commissioners Dandy Brown, C.D. "Budd" Ruffin, Clyde Dixon and Henry Lovette also agreed for the county to pro-

vide up to 2,800 collection bags for the clean-up effort, as well as the use of dump trucks to haul bags of litter to the landfill for disposal.

The motion to purchase the 2,800 heavy-duty bags — and to distribute 200 to each of the county's 14 fire-protection districts — at a cost of \$672.00 was made by Commissioners Lovette and Ruffin and passed unanimously.

Attorney Lee McPhearson said that public funds can be used for things that promote the health or welfare of the county's citizens.

"Cleaning up dumps and litter is perfectly proper and within what the law allows," McPhearson advised the board.

Commissioners said they would take care of distributing the bags to fire districts within their own districts, and would "spot" small dump trucks and/or trailers at strategic, central "drop off" points within a

community.

In addition, Terry Kelley, with the Choctaw Regional Landfill, has volunteered to place large, commercial-type dumpsters in several locations for use in dropping bags of collected trash.

To-date, several churches and fire departments have also indicated that they will be taking part in Operation Clean Sweep, and all interested persons, church leaders, school officials, businesses, youth groups, and others are invited to attend the next meeting, to be held Tuesday, March 20th at 7 p.m. at Gilbertown Town Hall to learn more.

Persons can also call Tommy Campbell at 251-843-6397 or email him at choctawsun@millry.net for more information.

Judge May also thanked the **Sun** for its efforts to help organize and publicize the clean-up event.