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## **Alaska Seasonal Fire Weather/Fire Danger Outlook-2009**

FAIRBANKS, ALASKA — According to weather forecasters and fire behavior experts at the Alaska Interagency Coordination Center in Fairbanks, much of Alaska is expected to have lower than normal fire potential in 2009.

Recent research into the size of areas burned seasonally in Alaska based on global weather patterns such as La Nina (the cool phase of the El Nino/Southern Oscillation) suggests a below normal number of acres will burn statewide. This is based on below average forecast temperatures, above average forecast precipitation and normal to above normal snow pack for the 2008-2009 season.

A national drought monitor shows no drought or abnormally dry areas across Alaska for the first time in several years. Unlike the last several years, there have been no reports of fires overwintering under the snowpack.

Fire potential based on human activity and the potential for human caused ignitions in the expanding wildland-urban interface areas in the Matanuska and Susitna Valleys in south central Alaska has increased, primarily due to continuing population growth and a dramatic increase in construction and land clearing. The Spruce bark beetle continues to spread into these areas, and along the notoriously windy Anchorage hillside, Turnagain Arm and Indian Creek.

Spruce bark beetle on the Kenai Peninsula and along Cook Inlet (also in the Copper River Basin) has caused nearly 2 million acres of beetle-killed timber. The beetle killed trees have evolved into areas of slash and grass mixed with snags which can quickly dry under mild weather conditions creating a dangerous and complex environment for fire-fighters and land managers.

These areas of hazardous fuels will persist and under certain weather and ignition opportunities, could cause large fire problems similar to the 2005 Tracy Avenue Fire which burned 5,400 acres, and the 2007 Caribou Hills Fire which burned 56,254 acres.

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Outlooks from the Climate Prediction Center indicate cooler than normal conditions across southern Alaska and above normal precipitation in western Alaska. The equatorial Pacific is under a weak La Nina with a pattern similar to, but weaker than last summer. This implies a cooler and slightly wetter summer.

Recent research by Dr. Paul Duffy at UAF into fire severity in Alaska based on global weather patterns suggests a below normal number of acres burned statewide (<http://zeus.neptuneinc.org/xRISA>). This however does not eliminate the chance of large or problem fires in specific areas should higher temperatures or dry periods occur.

The confidence level of this assessment is moderate. The timing and duration of precipitation and length of dry periods can make a big difference in developing conditions that are conducive to significant fire growth or an active fire season. The lightning season in Alaska does not normally begin until late May, and the prognosis for lightning occurrence accompanied by dry weather is not clear at this time.

For additional information and a chart displaying 10 year averages of acres burned in Alaska from 1955-2008, visit <http://afshome/content/weather/outlooks/seasonal.pdf>

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