Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group's

Community Meetings

2004-05

Summary of Public Comments, Recommendations and Actions

2004 Season of Record

Third driest summer on record…

Warmest summer on record…

Most lightning ever recorded…

Most acres burned…

The Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group approves and is committed to implementing the proposed recommendations and planned actions identified in this report.

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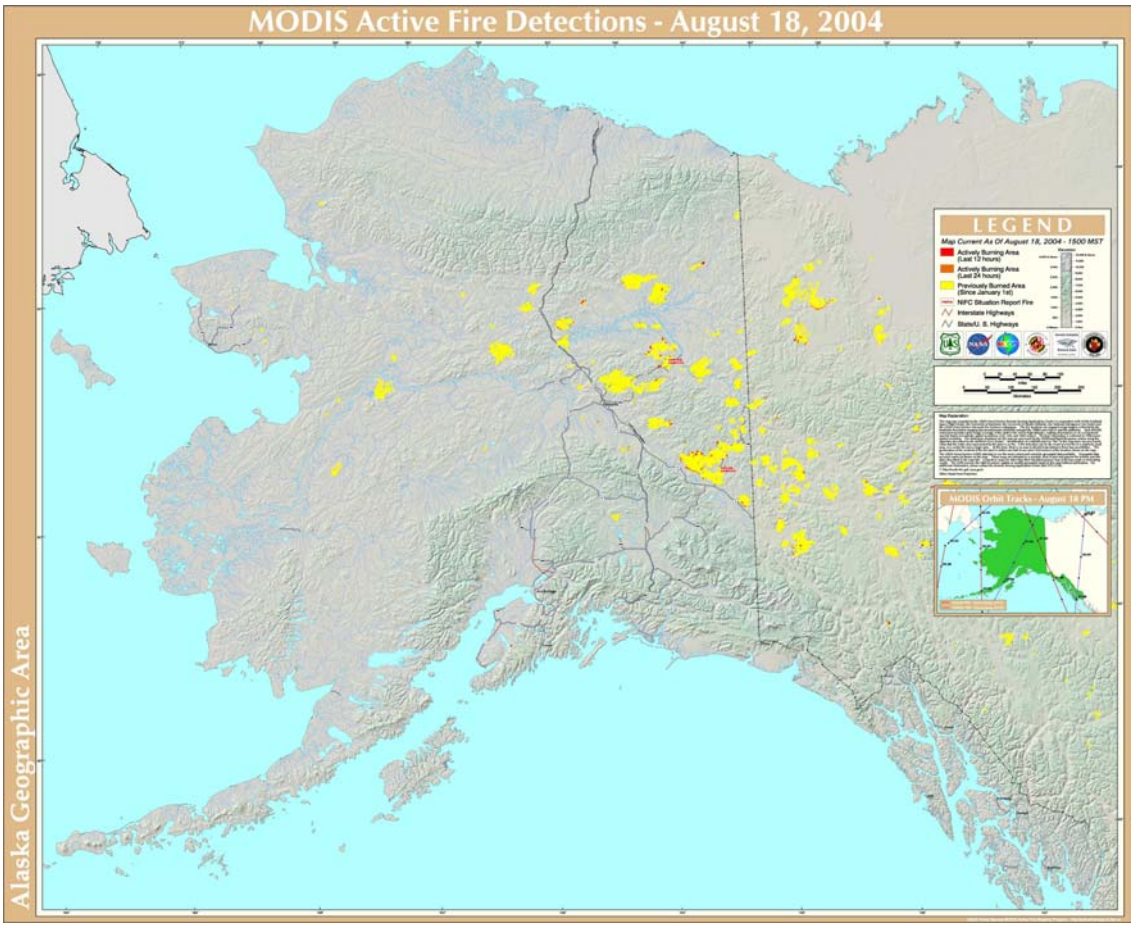


Satellite Mapped Fire Perimeters on August 18, 2004

Introduction

The Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group (AWFCG), a group of state, federal and Native land managers, sponsored a series of public meetings following the record setting 2004 fire season. Meetings were held in Two Rivers, Central, Fairbanks, Venetie, Delta Junction, Eagle, Dot Lake, Tanacross, Northway, Tok, Anchorage, Chatanika and Ft Yukon. Approximately 300 people attended these meetings.

Comments were also recorded at the fall meeting of the Forty-Mile Miners Association and at the Bureau of Indian Affairs Providers Conference.

In addition to the meetings, written comments from the public and the North Star Borough Wildland Fire Commission were received and incorporated into this summary of concerns.

Most of the meetings were positive and constructive benefiting both the public and agencies. Three documents were produced as a result of this outreach effort: this Summary, a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) list, and a full list of all recorded comments. The FAQs provided an opportunity to more fully answer questions raised during the meetings that are not addressed in the Summary's Recommendations or Actions Taken or Planned. The footnotes in the Summary clarify specific points in the text.

Comments were distributed to all members of the AWFCG as a basis for developing immediate and long-term fire and fuels management action items.

Each comment was categorized and summarized into one of the following subject headings. Relevant public and agency recommendations and actions are incorporated under each subject.

- *Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan (AIWFMP)* includes issues addressing management options and their implementation, conversion dates, planning and public participation, environmental concerns, legal requirements, land manager and tribal responsibilities, and fire policies.
- *Protection Responsibilities* includes issues regarding current State and federal policies on remote parcels, structure protection, mining claims, permits and historic sites, fire service areas, private lands, native allotments, defensible space, and homeowner responsibilities.
- *Preparedness* includes comments related to facilities, funding, staffing, and risk assessments to locate and identify values at risk.
- *Suppression* includes tactics, local hire, local involvement, crew issues, training, burning conditions, equipment use, retardant, ignitions, and expectations for spring 2005 and future fire seasons.
- *Incident Management Teams (IMTs)* includes comments on team assignments, transitions, public interaction, management style, use of Lower 48 teams, and the desire for local liaisons.
- *Health/Smoke* includes air quality, health hazards, and visibility issues.
- *Fuels* include concerns related to hazardous conditions and treatment methods.
- *Subsistence* includes concerns related to traditional lifestyles, fish and wildlife habitat, trapping cabins, and trap lines.
- *Public Information* includes all concerns related to public relations, information flow, communication between fire managers and local residents, timelines, accuracy, methods of disseminating, evacuations, and agency jurisdiction.
- *Predicative Services* includes topics of weather, climate, and seasonal forecasts.

- *Rehabilitation* includes issues of access, restoration and stabilization, and the Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER) report.

Although this summary focuses on what can be improved, there were many comments during the public meetings and from those who took the time to submit written comments expressing appreciation and support for the firefighting efforts, such as:

This was a year of extreme and unusual conditions. The various crews who assisted in the Tok, Chicken, Northway, and Eagle areas did a great job. Please pass on to them my thanks for a job well done." *Kathy Morgan, Tok*

"The Division of Forestry and everyone else fighting those fires did an extremely good job…There was no loss of life, extremely limited personal property damage, and very little inconvenience (other than smoke) to the general public. I consider that a job well done."
Steve Adams Fairbanks

"You did a hell of a job saving our lives" *Comment from Chatanika public meeting*

The Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan (AIWFMP)

"How are decisions made?"
A frequently asked question

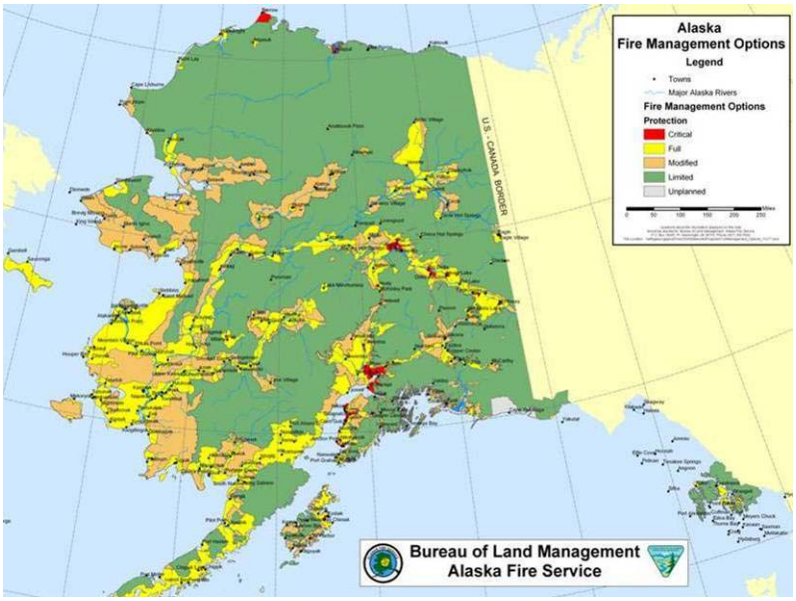
A wide range of concerns about the existing fire management plan were expressed at the meetings.

Some acknowledged the need to allow some fires to burn for healthier forests, improved wildlife habitat and to reduce the risk of large fires. Others noted a need to balance what is threatened with the costs involved in suppression. Opinions were also voiced that all fires should be put out, and that the decision to suppress or monitor a fire should be made locally at the time the fire starts.

It was suggested that in times of intense fire activity, aggressive suppression should be applied to ignitions in areas designated as Limited, and that communities and private land owners should be involved when the agencies review selected management options. Native communities advised getting input from village councils, as well as corporations. Agencies are seeking suggestions on how best to engage communities in planning and management option reviews.

More specific comments and concerns focused on the belief that some areas classified as Limited Management Option are too close to inhabited areas; that the conversion date when Modified areas become treated as Limited areas is too early in the season; and that the flexibility permitted by AIWFMP for a conversion date based on local conditions be exercised more often.

There were questions about who to contact and how communities and individuals can provide input into the process of setting management options and their boundaries.



Recommendations:

1. Increase public awareness of the AIWFMP.
2. Clearly explain how management option boundaries are delineated.
3. Provide opportunities in accordance with each agency's policies for community participation.
4. Conduct an intensive review of the current management option classifications based on the 2004 fire season and the likelihood similar seasons may occur in the future.

5. Place more emphasis on local conditions when evaluating the Modified conversion date[1].
6. Establish evaluation points when suppression levels adjustments should be considered based on existing conditions rather than pre-determined management option designations[2].
7. Engage local governments with suppression agencies in fire planning efforts within and adjacent to their boundaries.

Agency Actions to Date:
The AIWFMP is posted on the Alaska Fire Service website under Fire Planning at http://fire.ak.blm.gov/.

An annual review of management option designations is stipulated in the AIWFMP. During the winter of 2004-05, agencies have extensively reviewed management option designations and boundaries. Changes have been made and additional changes are in progress. Areas that are close to communities were reviewed to determine if there is a need to incorporate Modified option areas between Full and Limited areas.

The AWFCG has delegated a 3-person sub-committee to complete a review and update of the AIWFMP. Issues raised in oral and written comments from the Community Meetings, 2001 National Fire Plan update, the North Star Borough Wildland Fire Commission Report, and concerns identified during internal agency reviews will be considered. Subject matter experts will be consulted as needed.

The AWFCG has also streamlined the Alaska Multi-Agency Coordination Group (MAC) and is revising the MAC operations guide to more clearly define its roles, responsibilities and working relationships.

[1] The AIWFMP allows for staggering conversion dates based on local conditions. The AWFCG is the group responsible for determining these dates annually. In the past, the AWFCG has used game management units as defined by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) to describe the geographic extent of conversion dates. Game management units were chosen because they are a reference generally understood by the public.

[2] The AIWFMP currently provides flexibility for the land manager, land owner, or AWFCG to authorize an increased level of suppression regardless of management option designation as conditions require. This has been done in the past. However, there is no criteria identified in the AIWFMP when this adjustment should be considered or occur.

Protection Responsibility

"Everyone must be responsible for their own home."
Comment from the Northway public meeting

Protecting structures and personal property on private lands and lands occupied under federal or state permits was a hot topic. In some instances, the public was not aware of the policies or permit stipulations and whether their structures would or would not be protected. The public expressed concerns that this situation is exacerbated by selling land to private entities in areas currently designated as Limited[3]. There were also comments that individuals should take positive steps to prevent damage from fire to their homes/cabins and communities. It was pointed out that it is a personal preference to live outside a fire service area, the decision to build in unprotected areas is an individual's choice, and that those individuals should take responsibility for their choices.

Some expressed their concerns that too much emphasis was placed on fire's benefits to the ecosystem.

Citizens noted that some of the structures that burned did so after the main fire had gone through. It was felt that if suppression resources had done some minimal mop-up, these structures would not have burned.

Property owners and permittees need to be aware that regardless of management option designation, there is no guarantee that fire fighting personnel will be available to protect their site. In general, it was recognized that protecting all remote structures is not feasible given the cost, access, staffing, and higher priority protection needs. However, it was suggested that flexibility be incorporated into existing policy to allow an Incident Management Team or Incident Commander to protect structures if suppression resources are available. The public noted there were times when suppression forces were not fully engaged in firefighting and could have been used in assisting with structure protection by clearing fuels, or setting up pumps and sprinkler systems.

There were also questions regarding why native allotments, cultural sites, and historic structures are under full protection and other private cabins/property are not afforded the same protection.

Recommendations:

1. Evaluate State and federal structure protection policies.
2. Increase public awareness of actions they can take to protect their homes, cabins and structures.
3. Inform potential buyers and permittees of fire protection levels.
4. Clearly state priorities to incoming teams and consider whether it is operationally feasible to give the Incident Commander the flexibility to protect structures that are not specifically protected by either State and/or Federal policies.[4]
5. Promote community and local government Firewise programs to minimize risk to private structures and property.

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[3] Management option categorizations are designed to be flexible and to respond to changes in land use patterns. Changes are incorporated during annual reviews.
[4] This would be accomplished through the team's Delegation of Authority.

Actions Already Taken or Planned:
The State has been doing an extensive review of their policy regarding protection levels for private lands. Suggested changes have been submitted to Department of Natural Resources (DNR) managers for approval. State policy decisions are scheduled to be announced in April-May 2005.

Information on State programs to assist homeowners, communities, and local government entities is on the State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry website at http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/forestry/.

State and federal agencies have an annual review of management option designations and boundaries. Adjustments and changes are in place for the 2005 season.

Protection of permitted sites is not precluded in the AIWFMP, but is a matter of assigning fire fighting priorities consistent with statewide fire activity. Proposed changes to the wording to clarify Bureau of Land Management (BLM) policy has been submitted to BLM Field Offices and the BLM State Office for approval.

Federal and State agencies have been and are continuing to address wildland urban interface fire hazard issues. Agencies hosted the first Firewise workshop in Kenai in the spring 2001; a second was held in Fairbanks in the spring 2003. Ongoing agency programs have been enhanced as a significant interest in Firewise arose during and after the 2004 fire season. For example, in the spring of 2005, National Park Service (NPS) and DNR fire management staff will present Firewise workshops at Slana, Denali National Park, Talkeetna and McCarthy. These workshops are 4 hours in length, teach participants about fire in Alaska and the Firewise program, and conclude with a general fire risk home assessment. NPS Fire Management will annually present workshops to interested local communities adjacent to NPS lands.

In Eagle, the NPS is also actively working with school teachers to develop and present a Firewise program for the students. The students then will present Firewise concepts to the community during the annual Eagle community clean up day just after break up.

Another example of ongoing agency efforts is from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) who conducted a Firewise workshop in Northway and is working with the Kenai Peninsula Borough in developing wildfire mitigation plans. They have also awarded approximately $75,000 to volunteer fire departments in Bethel, Anchor Point, Funny River, Ninilchik, Tok and Nikiski for wildland fire fighting equipment purchases.

The BLM is scheduling risk assessments in the Forty Mile area during 2005.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs has service contracts for allotments with some of the non-profit Native corporations. This includes inventory and assessment work.

Firewise Alaska brochure is available
http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/forestry/pdfs/02firewise.pdf

Preparedness

"Will the State be getting additional funds to fight fire?"
Comment from the Tok meeting

"What are the agencies doing now to be prepared if this happens again" was the premise of all questions on preparedness were based.

The public was concerned about the availability of firefighting staff, equipment and aircraft. They wondered if Alaska would be able to get the personnel and equipment it needs if there is an active fire season in the lower 48 states.

Other questions from the public were:

- Will state or federal funding increase?
- Does the Division of Forestry have enough firefighting assets and if not, what is lacking?
- Is there a way to increase the fire fighting capability of the State?
- Do the agencies know where homes, structures and private resources are located?

A centralized mapping system to record private structures and other values was recommended.

Recommendation:

1. Develop a process for local governments and land management agencies to update maps to identify private homes, cabins and other structures.
2. Complete risk assessments on federal, state and native lands to identify values at risk.

Actions Already Taken or Planned:
In conjunction with State protection policy reviews, DNR is currently working on enhancing their Geographic Information Systems (GIS) databases.

Federal agencies are also continuing to update and improve information on land ownership, location of structures, and resources to be protected as well as building GIS capability.

Native corporations are also sponsoring risk assessments and inventories on native lands.

Suppression

"Alaskans need a break from the fires"
Comment from the Fairbanks

Questions were asked about the tactics used, the availability of fire fighting personnel and equipment, and future fire potential.

Several people believed that, at times, there was just too much fire on the land; it was no longer benefiting the ecosystem; and, it was adversely affecting wildlife and subsistence resources.

Comments made suggested that all fires should be aggressively attacked. Discussion followed on agency budgets, staffing levels, the Alaska Interagency Fire Management Plan, priority setting, and if the attempt to suppress all fires would stretch staffing levels to the point that the potential to catch new starts in Critical areas would actually decrease.

People are worried that the fires are not totally out and when the weather warms up in the spring, the fires will start to burn again. They questioned if fire danger and potential increased when trees are killed by the wildfires.

It was suggested that personnel and equipment could be better utilized. The National Guard had been used for helicopter support and to provide transportation for firefighters, but no military personnel were assigned to firefighting duties. There were questions regarding the effectiveness of firefighting due to restrictions on equipment use. Some people perceived there was too much stand-by time and that firefighters could be used to reduce fuels and construct fuel breaks when not actively involved in suppression.

The effects of retardant on fish and wildlife, whether or not there are health hazards related to the use of retardant, and the effects of the use of aerial ignition devices such as "ping pong" machines had on the environment were questioned.

Wildland fire suppression efforts also have both a social and economic effect on communities. Road closures are inconvenient for locals and may deterred tourism. The efforts to keep the Taylor Highway open as much as possible throughout the fire season were noted in the positive comments.

All the communities recognized the advantages of local hires. They suggested training local individuals to provide public and resource information and to fill non-fireline positions such as timekeepers. It was also recommended to increase the skills of the current crews and to add more Type II crews.

Recommendation:

1. Explain the role of fire in the boreal forest ecosystem and the potential negative effects of fire fighting.
2. Use community liaisons.
3. Promote local hire of personnel, crews, equipment and facilities.
4. Monitor and make available information on holdover fire activity this spring.
5. Minimize road closures and other actions that would cause economic impacts.

Actions Already Taken or Planned:

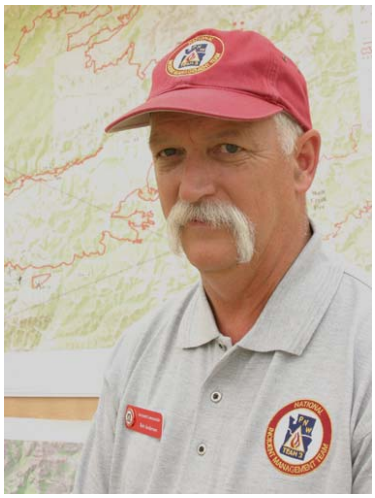
Current fire information is posted on the Alaska Fire Service website under Reports, Alaska Interagency Coordination Center, Situation Report, http://fire.ak.blm.gov/ . This would include reports of carry-over fires from 2004.

Contact local suppression organizations for spring training schedules for crew members and crew bosses.

Fire is a natural disturbance affecting a large portion of upland areas within mainland Alaska, particularly the northern boreal forest or taiga. Fire is the primary agent of change in the boreal forest and is responsible for maintaining habitat heterogeneity in the large portion of mainland Alaska that is covered by a mosaic of coniferous and deciduous forest, shrub, meadow, and bog habitats.

Incident Management Teams

"There was a revolving door of incident command officials."
Comment from public meeting Fairbanks



The use of Incident Management Teams (IMTs) and their public interactions were scrutinized by each community.

The communities felt that 14-day assignments were too short and counterproductive for a number of reasons, including:

- The community constantly having to adjust to new teams with different tactics, philosophies and personalities.
- Frequent rotation meant delays and, during each transition, information was lost. The communities provided the same information over and over again to replacement teams.
- Transitions were not always smooth and, because many of the teams were from the lower 48, it took team members time to adjust to fuel types and fire behavior.

People questioned tactics used and commented that when teams first arrived they were not as aggressive as they should have been in fighting the fires. The levels of community outreach by teams varied. Although the public felt that the teams were hesitant to use locals and local knowledge to develop tactics, the overall high use of local personnel, equipment, crews and facilities was acknowledged and encouraged. In addition, teams from the lower 48 benefited from having an Alaskan familiar with Alaskan operations assigned to the teams as well as having someone from the local community assigned to the team to facilitate the flow of information.

Recommendation:

1. Commit IMTs for 21-day assignments to allow for orientation, travel to, from and within Alaska and transition time with outgoing team.
2. Develop orientation modules specific to Operations, Finance, Plans and Logistics to facilitate faster adaptation to operating in Alaska by lower 48 teams.
3. Assign an Alaskan liaison to each team[5].
4. Update the Alaskan Orientation for incoming fire personnel.
5. Delegations of Authority to IMTs should include a stipulation to facilitate communications with the communities.
6. Promote and strengthen Alaska team commitments within Alaska federal and state agencies.

Actions Already Taken or Planned:

In fall 2004, the AWFCG proposed an automatic extension to 21-days for IMTs assigned to Alaska to the National Wildland Fire Coordinating Group. That proposal was rejected. Extension from the 14-day assignment rule will be determined on a case-by-case basis.

An Alaska Incident Business Management Handbook for the Finance section is available. Other modules are future projects.

An update to the Alaska Orientation Program is in progress and will be completed in spring 2005.

[5] This is a common practice based on personnel availability.

Health/Smoke

"We had smoke and we had darkness."
Comment during the Two Rivers meeting

Wildland fire and smoke are inevitable in Alaska. There was almost universal concern expressed at the meetings over the effects of smoke on people's health and the disruptions of activities due to smoke. Agencies were requested to provide information on smoke intensity and duration as well as predictions on where and when to expect smoke. People mentioned staying indoors did not provide relief due to the long duration and the intensity of the smoke. They asked whether or not smoke-free shelters will be provided in the future.

The Fairbanks Memorial Hospital and the Noel Wien Public Library reported that the facilities they opened to the public with improved air quality were rarely used. Local doctors were surprised that there was no increase in office visits, emergency room activity, or hospitalizations due to smoke.

Concerns were also expressed conducting prescribed fires when multiple wildfires were already burning. They asked whether there should be a threshold when all fires are suppressed because of smoke impacts to communities. It was suggested that the suppression agencies work with the Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC) on air quality issues.

Recommendation:

1. Establish smoke thresholds for determining when to consider alternative suppression responses.
2. Establish smoke relief shelters for communities heavily impacted by smoke.
3. Evaluate smoke impacts when determining whether to implement a prescribed fire[6].
4. Include information on smoke in fire updates, news releases and on the web[7].
5. Increase air quality monitoring capabilities.

Actions Already Taken or Planned:
The AWFCG Air Quality and Smoke Management Committee is evaluating and will be recommending smoke mitigation measures for adoption by all member agencies.

As situations arise, providing smoke shelters will be a joint effort by Borough, ADEC, land managers and suppression agencies.

ADEC in conjunction with the AWFCG Air Quality and Smoke Management Committee is in the final stages of an Enhanced Smoke Management Plan applicable to prescribed fire and open-burning.
The Alaska Fire Service, USFWS, the ADEC and the Fairbanks North Star Borough have purchased air quality monitoring equipment. Units are portable and a satellite link makes particulate level readings available in real time.

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[6] Smoke criteria is addressed in the prescribed burn plan and permits from ADEC are required for projects 40 acres or larger.
[7] This item will be forwarded to Public Information Officers.

Fuels

"Need to do more thinning around community; State could mark trees and let residents do thinning under state direction for fire wood."
Comment during the Tok meeting

Community participation and planning is a critical element in protecting any community from a wildland fire. There was general agreement at the meetings that work needed to be done to protect communities.

Federal and State agencies are available to assist communities. Funding through federally and state sponsored programs may be available. It was suggested that to reduce costs, the local agency could mark trees that needed to be thinned and then the locals could harvest the trees for firewood.

Two points raised:

- Ecologically sound methods should be used in doing fuel treatments or establishing fuel breaks.
- Use of prescribed fire should be weighed against ongoing wildland fire activity and smoke impacts.

Recommendations:

1. Continue to involve communities in the ongoing efforts by federal and State agencies to reduce hazardous fuels.
2. Support local governments' efforts to evaluate fuel conditions and methods for treatments within their boundaries.

Actions Already Taken or Planned:
Federal and State agencies continue their proactive approach in fuels treatments. Some examples:

- The DNR, Division of Forestry, Tok Area Office and the USFWS Tetlin Refuge are partnering to create an area of reduced fuels around the town of Tok.
- Northway, Allakaket, Tanacross and Nulato have successfully completed hazard reduction thinning projects around their villages.
- The USFWS is contracting for a thinning project on their land adjacent to Port Alcan.
- Huslia residents will be working on fire hazard reduction thinning around their village this summer.
- The U.S. Army Alaska continues to complete fuels reduction work on their lands.
- The DNR has been working on the Little Chena Fuels Treatment Project during March 2005.
- The BLM has been working at creating defensible space on Campbell Tract.
- The Municipality of Anchorage is using Congressional grants for hazard fuel reduction throughout the Anchorage bowl.
- NPS completed a hazardous fuels project around the Denali National Park Visitor's Center in 2004.

Local federal and State fuels specialists are available upon request to assist communities and local government entities in conducting evaluations and planning treatment projects.

Subsistence

"Moose have moved away from the village and the 'grocery store' is pretty empty."
Comment at Venetie

The overall and long term effect of fire on native cultures and subsistence activities was the focus of this issue.

Wolves had been observed close to Venetie; villagers attributed that to the extent of the burn north of town.

Fishing had been interrupted by firefighting and fire camps along the river. Community members are concerned that erosion will have an adverse affect on salmon habitat in tributaries of the Yukon River in the future.

Villagers in remote communities were apprehensive that important subsistence species like caribou and moose have been displaced. Would the fires cause the loss of habitat and less wildlife in the area or improve the habitat and increase the abundance of wildlife? Would they have to travel further to hunt this year? What should they expect next year? How are subsistence resources considered in the fire planning and suppression decisions?

Some were interested in whether or not a compensation mechanism is in place for those who lost hunting cabins[8].

Others would also like more information and research done on the effects of the loss of lichen on caribou.

Recommendation:

1. Support rehabilitation funding for wildlife research projects as identified in the BAER report, i.e. economic impact of caribou and moose displacement on Native Alaskans and other subsistence residents.
2. Engage Native communities in planning and suppression activities.
3. Establish monitoring strategies to determine the fire effects that involve the local native communities as well as federal and State agencies for areas that have traditionally had high subsistence use.

Actions Already Taken or Planned:
Research is currently being conducted on the Tetlin Refuge on the effects of fire on berry production.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) and the USFWS are conducting game surveys. Specific questions about fire effects on wildlife, fish, and subsistence can be directed to ADF&G, Division of Wildlife Conservation Area Biologist.

Much is already known about the effects of fire on fish and wildlife. One source of information is the ADF&G website at http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/management/management_home.cfm

[8] In general, no compensation is offered.

Public Information

"Early on there was not enough information for landowner preparation for the fire – so they could cut down trees or move animals in time." *Comment from the Two Rivers public meeting*

Many people were frustrated by their inability to get accurate and timely information.

Initially, the public had no central point of contact for information. In Fairbanks, it was not clear to the public what areas were or were not being evacuated, exactly where the active fire was located, or where they could obtain accurate information. They remarked that knowing the location of points a fire had not yet reached was as important as where the fire was burning. Rural communities also noted difficulties with information distribution.

Once the Joint Information Center was established and staffed, people felt that the information flow improved. Citizens from the Fairbanks area and other communities were, however, very concerned about the use of Information Officers from outside of Alaska and recommended hiring locals to work in information centers, answer phones and provide local information. Many felt that people within the community have more knowledge of local landmarks and could relate information more clearly to other members of their community.

Suggestions to improve news media relationships and to fully use all available means of communication including radio and television broadcasts to update residents were made. The use of community bulletin boards and posting information at the entrance to subdivisions as well as public gathering areas such as the post office and grocery stores were highly recommended. Suggested at all meetings was the use of locals to facilitate communications between the teams and community.

The public also suggested that maps with current fire boundaries be made available on the web; that the use of "reverse 911" be considered; that "crawlers" be shown on the television; and that pre-established call lists be created to facilitate evacuations. Citizens asked about the availability of grants to help communities develop plans prior to an incident.

Recommendation:

1. Establish a multi-agency task group in the Fairbanks area to address emergency communication issues.
2. Establish a joint information center readily accessible to the general public.
3. Create an Alaska-specific public briefing module for Information Officers.
4. Recruit non-fire Alaska federal and state agency personnel to answer the phones and provide locals with updated information.
5. Provide Incident Information Officer training for federal and state agencies' personnel and local community members so they can be utilized during an emergency.
6. Establish one central interagency website that provides the most current fire information, including smoke predictions, fire perimeter maps, road closures and evacuations.
7. Assign a person from the local community to teams to facilitate communication with the community.
8. Research the feasibility of using Reverse 911 in Fairbanks, Delta and other Alaska communities.
9. Prepare answers to commonly expressed concerns/questions to be distributed to individuals who submitted comments, available to state and federal agencies, and posted on a website.

Actions Already Taken or Planned:
BLM, Alaska Fire Service, is in the process of hiring a permanent full time public affairs officer. Every effort is being made to have a person in place by June 2005. Once filled, that person will be tasked with following up on these recommendations.

NPS has a Regional Fire Communication and Education Specialist in place at Denali who has been working on community information outreach projects in Eagle and has several Firewise workshops scheduled for spring 2005 in communities adjacent to the park lands.

There is national direction for website standards and contents that the Alaska Interagency Coordination Center must meet. The Alaska Fire Service website will be converted to that new format in the fall of 2005. Links will be provided to other agency websites.

NPS is working to create a web page for the 2005 fire season that will provide accurate and timely fire information, fire perimeter maps, and photos for fires on NPS lands. Guidelines have been established to assist park managers in determining when to request Information Officers.

The Fairbanks North Star Borough is researching the potential of a reverse 911 system.

A Frequently Asked Questions document has been developed. It will be posted on the Alaska Fire Service website and distributed to land management agencies, Native organizations and interested public.

Predictive Services

The public asked why the fire season predictions were so far off, and why the suppression agencies were caught off-guard. They also asked what is being done to improve predictions and suggested that the agencies sponsor research specific to Alaska on weather patterns and the effects weather has on fire behavior.

Recommendations:

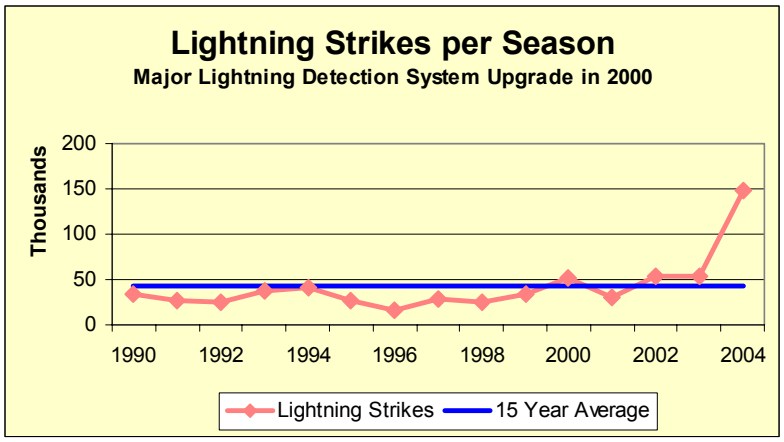
1. Continue to support research to improve the forecasting of fire seasons in Alaska.
2. Continue to support fire behavior research.
3. Submit a request to the National Wildland Fire Coordinating Group to fund a Long Term Fire Behavior Analyst to assist and supplement the existing Fire Weather Program.

Actions Already Taken or Planned:

Examples of research support:

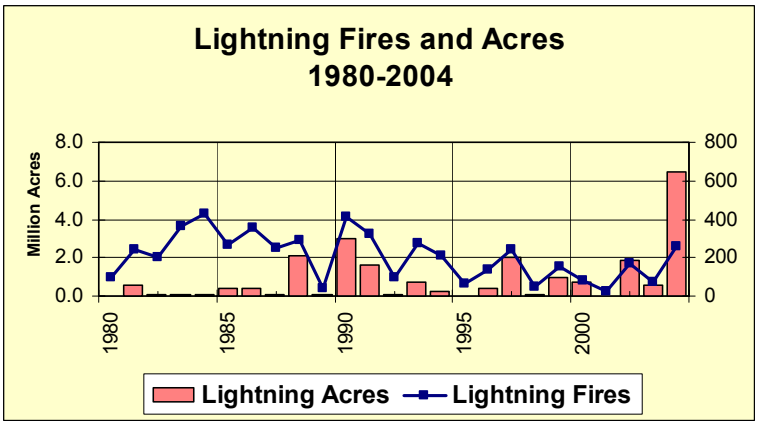
- The AWFCG Fire Research and Applications Committee reviews and recommends proposals for funding by the Joint Fire Science Program.
- University of Alaska Fairbanks has ongoing research on how to better predict fire seasons in Alaska.
- The Pacific Northwest Research Station has ongoing fire behavior research projects in Alaska.

The Manager of Alaska Fire Service is preparing an issue paper for a Long Term Fire Behavior Analyst or similar position to work in Predictive Services at the Alaska Interagency Coordination Center.



2004

Temperatures well above average.
Rainfall well below average.
Widespread thunderstorms.
High number of lightning strikes.
Strong high pressure ridge.
Unusual north/northeast winds.
Large fire growth continued into August.
6.5 million acres burned.



Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation of trails was a high priority in many areas. Existing trails had been used as fire lines. Some trails are essential for subsistence hunting, trapping, and winter travel. Concerns were raised about how repairs would be funded, who would do the work, and when it would be completed. In the transition between teams, the information about the condition of the original trail, or even the knowledge that there was a pre-existing trail, was sometimes lost.

Stabilization work completed by the suppression forces was designed to discourage the use of fire and dozer lines as new trails. Differing opinions on access issues lead to discussions on the whether or not there was an option to leave dozer and fire lines open, and if lines were left open, would the result be additional damage.

Others wanted to ensure lines were sufficiently rehabilitated to discourage any new motorized access. Questions also included what standards and methods would be used in stabilization and rehabilitation. In particular, water bars may be installed too prominently and could injure someone who used motorized equipment.

Additionally, the public also expressed concern about potential erosion and the possibility of flooding in the spring.

Recommendation:

1. Make suppression emergency stabilization plans available to the public.
2. Make the Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER) report widely available.
3. Monitor the fireline rehabilitation work to assure that dozer and hand lines were properly rehabilitated and not being used for motorized access where not appropriate.

Actions Already Taken or Planned:
An interagency BAER team was in Alaska in August 2004 and will return in June 2005 to complete an evaluation of stabilization and rehabilitation needs.

The 2004 BAER report is available at http://www.ak.blm.gov/baer/index.html

The DNR, Division of Mining, Land and Water is developing new standards for dozer line placement and construction on State lands to minimize impacts on trails.

ACRONYMS

Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation	**ADEC**
Alaska Department of Fish and Game	**ADF&G**
Alaska Department of Natural Resources	**DNR**
Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan	**AIWFMP**
Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group	**AWFCG**
Bureau of Indian Affairs	**BIA**
Bureau of Land Management	**BLM**
Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation	**BAER**
Geographic Information System	**GIS**
Incident Management Team	**IMT**
Multi-Agency Coordination Group	**MAC**
National Park Service	**NPS**
United States Fish and Wildlife Service	**USFWS**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is the day-to-day function of the Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan (AIWFMP)?

The fire management plan sets priorities for the assignment of firefighting resources statewide.

How are priorities set for the assignment of firefighting resources?

Firefighter and public safety are the highest priority for all fire management activities. The Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan sets the initial attack priorities through the use of management option designations.

What is a fire management option?

Management options provide a range of alternatives from aggressive initial attack to surveillance. The AIWFMP contains 4 management option choices. Critical management option lands are the first priority for the assignment of suppression forces followed by Full, Modified and Limited in that order.

Who decides what management options apply to what lands?

Options are apportioned on a landscape scale across agency boundaries through a collaborative process by federal, State and Native land manager/owner(s) and suppression agencies.

Who represents private landowners?

The State of Alaska under State Statue 41.15.010

What are management option designations based on?

Option designations are based on an evaluation of legal mandates, policies, regulations, land use, resource management objectives, and local conditions.

How often are management options updated?

The AIWFMP stipulates an annual, pre-season land manager/owner review of the fire protection needs and management option designations. Changes are to be submitted to suppression agencies by April 1 of each year.

What determines Modified conversion date?

The Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group (AWFCG) makes this determination based on an assessment of land managers inputs, weather trends, and the statewide fire occurrence. There are no predetermined dates for conversion; the customary date for conversion has been on or about July 10.

How are suppression decisions made?

Initial response decisions are determined by the management option designation defined under the AIWFMP. When a fire is beyond the capabilities of the initial forces, a Wildland Fire Situation Analysis is developed to evaluate alternatives and choose what the future actions will be.

How are suppression decisions implemented?

Delegations of Authority that set incident priorities, objectives and constraints are developed based on the Wildland Fire Situation Analysis and given to Incident Management Teams.

Who sets fire priorities during time of high fire activity?

Priorities are set by the Multi-Agency Coordinating Group (MAC). The function of this interagency group of land managers is to make decisions regarding the prioritizing of incidents and the sharing and use of critical fire fighting resources.

How do private landowners request full protection? How can private landowners ensure that their property is recorded on the suppression map atlas?

Private landowners should discuss the management option assigned to their property with their local State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry office.

How do you know what management options are assigned to state or federal permitted lands i.e. mining claims, recreation permits, etc.?

The stipulations in your permit should indicate the extent of protection offered. If not, check with the permitting office.

Will the assignment of Critical or Full Management Option to my site guarantee that my site will be protected from wildland fire?

The designation does not guarantee forces will be assigned to protect that site. The statewide fire occurrence and potential, availability of firefighting resources, access, defensible space requirements, and hazardous materials on the site are examples of factors that are considered.

Why do Native allotments receive full protection?

Native allotments are trust lands of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). BIA policy directs full protection.

Why do historical sites receive full protection?

Section 110 of the National Historic Preservation Act states “all Federal agencies shall assume responsibility for the preservation of historic properties which are owned or controlled by such agency."

What is the role of fire in the boreal forest ecosystem?

Fire is the primary agent of change in the boreal forest and is responsible for maintaining habitat heterogeneity in the large portion of mainland Alaska. For thousands of years, periodic fires have served to select plants and animals that are adapted to fire-caused change. Both the black and white spruce, for example, depend on severe ground fire to clear organic layers and to expose fertile seedbed. Black spruce, moreover, is at least partially dependent upon stand-replacement fire, in that its seeds become ready for germination at the peak of the Alaskan interior fire season and are released when its semi-serotinous cones are opened by canopy fire. Even more fundamentally, fire plays a key role in the regulation of the permafrost table throughout all the ecosystems of the Alaskan interior. Without fire, organic matter accumulates, the permafrost table rises, and ecosystem productivity declines. Vegetation communities become much less diverse and wildlife habitat decreases. Fire rejuvenates these systems. It removes insulating organic matter and elicits a warming of the soil. Nutrients are added both as a result of combustion and by increased decomposition rates.

What is the effect of fire exclusion from an ecosystem?

Excluding fire can result in the unnatural build up of vegetation which has resulted in catastrophic fires in the lower 48. It can also result in ecosystem productivity declining as the organic matter continues to increase.

What is the effect of fire exclusion in the boreal forest?

Excluding fire from the boreal forest, cuases in an increase in old spruce dominated stands. Continuous expanses of fire-prone spruce forest can fuel large, intense fires which are difficult to contain, and expensive and dangerous to fight. This unnatural change in the forest cover also reduces forest productivity and diversity, which in turn adversely affects most wildlife species.

Will federal and state fire fighting budgets be increased as a result of intensity 2004 season?

No, budgets are static.

Will federal and state agency policies change as a result of the 2004 season?

Policies are under review; a few changes and/or clarifications have been recommended.

Why wasn't the military including the National Guard mobilized?

Fully qualified trained personnel from Alaska and the Lower 48 were available to fill request for personnel in 2004. National Guard personnel and equipment was used to transport firefighters; military personnel have not been trained to fight fires.

Why are Lower 48 personnel used in Alaska?

The extent of wildland fire activity exceeded the capabilities of trained and qualified personnel working in Alaska.

Why are the assignments only 14 days?

The national policy was written by the National Wildland Fire Coordinating Group and states the "standard assignment length is 14 days, exclusive of travel from and to the home unit". This policy was written to mitigate the fatigue that firefighters and fire managers accrued over the course of the fire season.

Why is the use of heavy equipment restricted?

Heavy equipment may permanently damage permafrost soils and tundra.

What can the homeowner's and permittee's to protect their homes and property?

Their responsibility is to implement Firewise concepts. An Alaska-specific Firewise brochure is available at http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/forestry/pdfs/02firewise.pdf.

Where can more information on homeowner and community actions be obtained?

Reference material is available on the internet. For example**:**

- Jack P. Cohen's article "A Site-Specific Approach for Assessing Fire Risk to Structures at the Wildland/Urban Interface" available at http://www.firelab.org/fbp/fbppubs/fbppdf/cohen/sitespecificapproach.pdf
- Reference the Firewise website for landscape recommendations at http://www.firewise.org/
- An example of a mitigation plan is Kenai Borough's All Hazard Mitigation Plan posted at http://www.ci.kenai.ak.us/KenaiHazmitPlanFinalDraft.pd
- The National Fire Plan website http://www.fireplan.gov/ discuss programs available to communities.
- An example for format and content for preparing a Community Wildland Fire Protection Plan http://www.safnet.org/policyandpress/cwpphandbook.pdf

Why is timely and accurate information during the first 24-72 hours so difficult to obtain?

In spite of the information age we live in, obtaining information from the fireline during periods of intense, active fire behavior and extreme fire growth is not instantaneous. Fire fighters are busy dealing with on-the-ground life, property and safety concerns. As personnel fill public information positions, the flow of information improves. The effort to provide accurate information may also inhibit the effort to provide timely information.

What is the BAER Plan?

The 2004 Alaska Burned Area Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation (BAER) Plan addresses emergency stabilization and rehabilitation of fire suppression impacts and fire effects as a result of the 2004 fires in interior Alaska. The primary objectives are to determine mitigation measures necessary to protect human life, property, and critical cultural and natural resources, and

to mitigate the unacceptable effects of the fire and suppression impacts on lands within and adjacent to the burned area.

Where can I get a copy of the BAER Plan?

http://www.ak.blm.gov/baer/index.html

Is there data showing the effects of fire retardant?

U. S. Geological Survey has done research; the information is available at http://www.cerc.cr.usgs.gov/pubs/briefs/uv_fire_chemicals.pdf.

What are the health hazards associated with smoke from a wildland fire?

Suggested reading: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, General Technical Report RMRS-GTR-42-volume 5, December 2002, *Wildland Fire in Ecosystems, Effects of Fire on Air* available at http://www.fs.fed.us/rm/main/fire_res/fire_pubs.html.

What is the role of the Predictive Service section of the Alaska Interagency Coordination Center?

The role is to integrate climate, weather, situation, resource status, and fuels information into products that will enhance the ability of managers to make sound decisions for both short and long range strategy development and resource allocation decisions.

Will salvage sales be offered?

The State has identified areas where timber salvage appear to be feasible and have proposed sales within the Billy Creek fire near Dot lake, two areas north of Tok near Wolf Lake, and one site along the Taylor Highway. Long term salvage rights will be marketed in spring 2005.

What should we expect to see next spring?

There may be small areas that smoldered through the winter in the riparian areas vegetated with white spruce. These areas contain deep duff and are sheltered from the harshest weather by the canopy cover. These hotspots are usually present little potential for fire danger. You may see the smoke.

What is the fire potential in the burned areas next year?

Environmental conditions plays a large role. Overall the fire danger potential is very low for 5 to 10 years after a fire.