



Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group

**U.S. Department
of the Interior**

Bureau of Indian Affairs

Bureau of Land Management

National Park Service

US Fish and Wildlife Service

State of Alaska

Department of Fish and Game

Department of
Natural Resources
Division of Forestry

Department of
Environmental Conservation

**U.S. Department
of Agriculture**

US Forest Service

Native Organizations

Association of
Village Council Presidents

Chugachmiut

Tanana Chiefs Conference

**Structural Fire Departments
& other Organizations**

Anchorage Fire Department

September 4, 2020

Dear AWFCG,

On behalf of the task assignment from AWFCG to the Wildland Fire Education & Prevention Committee (WFEP) in November 2019, we submit this Communications Plan for the coming five years to expand outreach that would further the public's understanding of fire management in Alaska.

Given that the boreal forest of Alaska is a fire-dependent ecosystem, the fire community has an obligation to better connect the public with the strategies and tactics used to manage wildfires to protect life and property while also allowing fire to function in its natural ecological role. Recognizing that each member agency to the AWFCG has different objectives to attain in their respective roles as protection and jurisdictional organizations, along with representation for landowners in their purview, this plan synthesizes those approaches to deliver messaging in a way that respects the perspectives of the agencies and the people.

Alaskans have been living with fire and often are directly impacted by threats to life and property. They frequently experience the effects of smoke, prescribed fire, and fire mitigation activities in a complex arena of fire management across multiple jurisdictions with variable objectives. Fire's effects on transportation corridors, public health, and local economies often upset the balance of life and business. Our goal is to define the objectives and limitations of fire management with respect to Alaskan community values and ecosystems. This task will include translating the Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan into language that answers why some fires are allowed to burn and how fire suppression activities work in concert with natural forces and community values.

Complications surrounding the Swan Lake Fire in 2019 lead to challenging questions from the regional community including businesses, tourists, and residents as the fire burned for 3 ½ months. Road closures and delays on the Sterling Highway, poor air quality from heavy smoke on the Kenai Peninsula and in Anchorage, and severe economic detriments to fishing- and tourist-reliant businesses demanded improvements in fire communication and management in a place where fire is expected but still surprises us. While communications during this fire exceeded many standards previously set, the high visibility of the fire and its direct impacts could not all be mitigated in real time. Will a greater understanding of fire management help resolve the issues we face almost annually? Are there other tools and tactics that our fire community can employ? The WFEP will review our current messaging and research new ways to connect fire management with the people who live and play in this environment.

Sincerely,

Molly Birnbaum, Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation
Chair, Wildland Fire Education & Prevention Committee

Communication Goals

To address this task assignment, the WFEPCC adjusted the concepts to fit into relevant messaging categories. Some of these elements are already part of the WFEPCC portfolio and others have been used locally or by specific incidents. Components of this tasking may extend to local governments including support for and coordination with local public affairs officers in their communication with the political and business communities.

1. Understanding fire management in Alaska specific to the Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan, the differences between jurisdictional and protecting agencies, the incident decision process, and smoke management. Describe management options and suppression response.
2. Homeowners taking action through programs such as Firewise; Fire Adapted Communities; and Ready, Set, Go to make their homes and communities more resistant to the threat of wildfires and to be better prepared when fires do pose a threat. As part of this concept, the committee will consider techniques used by Alaska Incident Management Teams (IMTs) such as evacuation orders.
 - a. After the fire recovery concepts for the forest and homes
 - b. Understanding your CWPP: where can you access it, how can you be involved, how can you take action
3. The ecological role of fire, and how changing climatic conditions are affecting wildfire in Alaska. Ecosystem function represents the suite of natural processes that are influenced and maintained by fire such as wildlife habitat, forest succession, and hydrologic cycles.
4. Effective communications during a wildland or prescribed fire with respect to smoke, fire activities, and how suppression response or evacuations are communicated to the affected public and others.
5. Smoke management communications to support public health, view sheds, tourism, recreation, and community function.
6. Prescribed fire applications and benefits in support of multiple objectives ranging from wildlife habitat to mitigating hazardous fuels.

As part of its communication plan to educate the Alaska public about the intricacies of fire management in Alaska, the WFEPCC will define key messages and topics necessary for connecting fire management principles to the public; inventory products, media, and venues that currently exist for outreach; and conduct a gap analysis to define needs for development of additional products or improvement to existing products used for outreach.

Some products will be created for use during the 2021 (or have been created for 2020) fire season while others will be produced for long-term use. This outreach effort will expand over several years and can be modified to accommodate new developments or issues that arise as a result of a changing climate that has produced longer, bigger and more intense fire seasons in Alaska during the past two decades. Because some products will require funding to complete, part of the WFEPCC's plan is to explore available funding mechanisms that could support new tools or materials.

Action Items Fall and Winter 2020-2021

1. Define the target audience
2. Identify products that can address the topics relative to each audience
3. Schedule products to be ready for 2021 season (March)
4. Expand the plan during the winter 2020/2021 season

Target Audience

- Local, state, and federal agencies and cooperators
- Residents and private landowners
- Businesses
- Tribal & Native entities
- Media
- Stakeholders (special interest and user groups)

Key Messages - The WFEPC updated formal key messages in 2018; these will be used as the basis for new products developed.

- Public and firefighter safety is our first priority.
- Wildland fire happens, be ready.
- Wildland fire is an essential, natural process.
- Alaskans work together to manage wildland fire.
- Managing wildland fire in Alaska balances risks and benefits in an ever-changing environment.
- Prevention is key to reducing human-caused wildfires.

Talking Point Categories – Many of these have substantial material already available for distribution; the WFEPC will expand those points that require more detail. From here, products and materials will be developed for specific venues as applicable to the target audience.

- Wildland Urban Interface
- Fire Management – how it works, who does it
- Climate (Environmental) Change
- Smoke Management
- Ecological Benefits of Fire
- What are fire managers doing now to address the above elements?
- How can Alaskans take action to prepare for fire and their own safety?

Strategy

- Identify what communications products already exist; determine what is needed.
- Develop communication products that are cost effective and suitable for multiple audiences.
- Make all products available to field fire PIOs in an effort to provide timely education to individuals affected by fire.

Tactics – This list represents an initial set of products that the WFEPC will pursue in the coming year as member capacity allows. Contracted resources will also be considered as funding is available through grants or other sources.

- Brochures – Many are available on the [Alaska Interagency Coordination Center website under AWFCG](#). Selected talking points may be further addressed through print material in addition to digital products.
- Radio PSAs (both rural and urban radio stations)
- Update Alaska orientation videos, especially [Chapter 15](#) which addresses the AIWFMP. Make the videos more widely available to the public.
- Develop a shortened video series about wildland fire management in Alaska based on geographic areas. This could easily be used on several platforms to include social media.
- Provide support to agencies and entities doing pre-season outreach. Examples include website information, posters, and story maps.
- Fire Prevention and Education presentations in communities to include schools. Consider the NPS fire prevention curriculum for the classroom.
- Add prevention presentations at incident community meetings.
- Develop a story map explaining fire management in Alaska.
- Identify fuels reduction projects – past and present – and explain their purpose and benefits.
- Use outside sources for developing communications products.

Success – Evaluate the effectiveness of this campaign through metrics associated with digital platforms and other survey mechanisms to gather perspectives from the public. WFEPC will perform annual reviews of this campaign and adjust as necessary to maintain momentum and connectivity to the public.

- Increase the general public's understanding of wildland fire management in Alaska
- Develop methods to monitor 'views' or number of contacts