

# Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group

## Wildland Fire Education and Prevention Committee



### Interagency Wildland Fire Key Messages

Approved 1/24/07

#### Introduction

Wildland fire management agencies and organizations in Alaska share common goals: to enhance personal safety and reduce loss of life while preserving and enhancing the health of forests and wetlands. For the public to truly understand the role of wildland fire, we must communicate clearly and consistently across all agencies and disciplines. To this end, the Wildland Fire Education and Prevention Committee (WFEP), through the Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group (AWFCG), developed Wildland Fire Key Messages based on the following two key thematic points:

#### Role of Wildland Fire

Wildland fire is an essential, natural process that is important for the survival of many plants and animals in the boreal and tundra ecosystems of Alaska. Fires helped shape these ecosystems for thousands of years. Fire reduces accumulation of vegetation that can inhibit plant growth, stimulates new growth and reproduction in many plants, and provides diverse wildlife habitat. Fires behave differently throughout Alaska. Fire behavior is affected by weather, topography and vegetation. We continue to learn and now have a more complete understanding of the essential role fire plays in our environment.

#### Current Conditions

In most of Alaska, past suppression efforts have not altered the fire regimes. However, ongoing attempts to exclude fire near populated areas are changing forest characteristics, resulting in increased fuel continuity and reduced habitat diversity and productivity. There is a growing concern over the increasing fuel continuity near the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). These areas include forest and wetlands adjacent to villages, towns, cities, communities and may encompass individual cabin sites as well. When paired with the right topography and weather conditions, the expanse of spruce-dominated forest in these areas can lead to fires that burn hotter, spread faster and last longer. These fires are difficult to manage and pose a grave threat to residents and firefighters alike.

This document is a guide for all those involved in wildland fire management. We hope it will help you communicate with key audiences about wildland fire. *This is not a script.* Users are encouraged to incorporate these concepts into their communication in their own words, making the information relevant to their specific situations. What follows is a description of what we mean by “key messages” and other important pieces of this effort.

**Key Messages:** Key messages are general concepts that agencies are encouraged to incorporate into their discussions, print materials, and other communication, education, information, and prevention resources. Key messages are umbrella statements that require additional supporting points and examples for context.

**Supporting Points:** The supporting points provide detail for the key messages and enable users to further explain the roles of: wildland fire in the ecosystem, land management agencies, suppression agencies, tribes, and partners.

**Examples:** Users are strongly encouraged to use local examples to place the key message and supporting points into context for their audiences, connecting with them on a personal and emotional level.

For more information, contact your AWFCG WFEP agency representative listed on the last page of this document.

## Key Messages

1. **Public and firefighter safety is our first priority.**
2. **Wildland fire happens, be ready.**
3. **Wildland fire is an essential natural process.**
4. **Alaskans work together to manage wildland fire.**
5. **Managing wildland fire in Alaska balances risks and benefits in an ever changing environment.**

## Key Messages and Supporting Points

1. **Public and firefighter safety is our first priority.**
  - Federal and state policies reflect the fact that human life concerns are placed above all others.
2. **Wildland fire happens, be ready.**
  - People who live and recreate in fire-prone lands assume a certain level of risk and responsibility. Managing risk from wildland fire is a personal responsibility.
    - People can live compatibly with fire, if aware of and prepared for local fire conditions.
      - ◆ Individuals can reduce fire risk to their homes, property and communities.
      - ◆ Contact your local, state, or federal agencies to determine your community's fire conditions and discover tips to reduce your community's fire vulnerability – before a fire starts.
      - ◆ The more populated and closer a community is to fire prone areas, the greater the need for proactive fire management and community involvement.
3. **Wildland fire is an essential, natural process.**
  - Fire has shaped many wildlands for thousands of years; in these areas, fire is important for the survival of many plants and animals.
    - Fire removes insulating thatch, moss, and shading vegetation so sunlight can warm the soil. Fire recycles nutrients tied up in vegetation biomass and the duff and soil organic layer.
    - Some plants and animals depend on fire for survival.
      - ◆ Fire stimulates some plants to seed and creates favorable sites for dormant seeds to grow.
      - ◆ Fire stimulates some plants such as willow, aspen and birch to grow new shoots from still-alive roots or root crowns.
      - ◆ Fire maintains age and species diversity in the forest, increasing the number of niches for wildlife species.  
*Use local examples (black spruce has semi-serotinous cones that release seeds after fire; another plant example includes Morel mushrooms; moose browse on young willow and aspen stems after fire.)*
  - Fire behaves differently throughout Alaska.
    - In addition to fuels (vegetation), fire behavior is affected by weather and terrain.
    - Virtually all vegetation types in Alaska can experience wildland fire but some like black spruce are especially prone to burning. Others, like hardwood stands, only burn well under extreme conditions.  
*Use local examples.*
4. **Alaskans work together to manage wildland fire.**
  - Fires spread when conditions are right.

## Key Messages and Supporting Points continued...

- Fires cease only when either there is no fuel or conditions are not suited for burning.
- Fire does not acknowledge jurisdictional boundaries of federal, state, and local agencies, native organizations or private landowners.
- Wildland fire management in Alaska is a joint effort among federal, state, and local governments, native organizations, fire departments, communities and landowners.
  - Agencies, native organizations and communities are working together to understand and accept what it means to live in a fire-prone area and to realize the benefits of managing fire in the wildlands.
    - ◆ Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plans have provided overarching guidance to agencies and native organizations for 25 years.
    - ◆ Agencies and native organizations strive to teach local government leaders and property owners how to make their land and property more defensible against wildfire.  
*Use local examples.*

### 5. Managing wildland fire in Alaska balances risks and benefits in an ever changing environment.

- All fire management programs in Alaska adhere to the Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan (AIWFMP).
  - The AIWFMP sets priorities for the assignment of firefighting resources statewide.
  - The AIWFMP sets the initial attack priorities through the use of management option designations.
    - ◆ 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.
- Fire management programs are customized for specific wildland areas to maintain healthy ecosystems and protect neighboring communities.
  - Fire management programs are designed based on a balance of needs including fire suppression, prevention and using fire as a tool. There will always be a need for prevention and suppression to protect people and communities.
  - Fire is a management tool used to accomplish specific objectives in a plan such as removal of excess vegetation or stimulating plant growth and regeneration.
    - ◆ Fires are either suppressed or allowed to burn and are monitored in a predefined area.
      - Allowing a wildland fire to burn reduces the likelihood of a large, rapidly spreading fire in the future when conditions are extreme.
      - Allowing a wildland fire to burn breaks up forest fuel continuity making it easier to manage future fires and creates areas of younger vegetation needed by some wildlife, such as moose.
      - Allowing a wildland fire to burn can help mitigate further smoke problems.
    - ◆ Sometimes it may be necessary and/or beneficial for land managers to ignite fires in a closely monitored and confined area. These fires are referred to as prescribed fires.
      - Smoke from a prescribe fire is a sign that steps are being taken to reduce the risks and realize the benefits of fire. The more land management agencies can plan and manage fire the more they can reduce smoke impacts.
- A fire program may also include non-fire treatments to prepare the land before natural or prescribed fire can be applied safely and effectively.
- When paired with the right terrain and weather conditions, unbroken expanses of spruce forest lead to fires that burn hotter, last longer, and spread faster. As a result, these fires may become difficult to manage and can threaten areas of residential development.
- Every wildland fire season is different due to seasonal and/or annual variation.
  - Two of Alaska's top-three wildland fire seasons have happened in two consecutive years. 4.5 million acres burned in 2005, Alaska's third largest wildland fire season. 6.7 million acres burned in 2004, the largest season since reliable records began in the 1950's.
  - Other years, such as 2006, are notable for their lack of fire. 266,000 acres burned in 2006.

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## For Additional Information about Wildland Fire

- **Alaska Interagency Coordination Center** - <http://fire.ak.blm.gov/>
- **Anchorage Fire Department** - <http://www.muni.org/fire1/index1.cfm>,  
<http://www.afdfireinfo.com>
- **State of Alaska,**
  - **DEC, AQ** - <http://www.dec.state.ak.us/air/smokemain.htm>
  - **ADF&G, DWC** – <http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=fire.main>
  - **DNR, DOF** - <http://forestry.alaska.gov/>
- **U.S. Department of the Interior**
  - **BLM, Alaska Fire Service** - <http://fire.ak.blm.gov/afs/afs.php>
  - **National Park Service** - <http://www.nps.gov/akso/Fire/firehome.htm>
  - **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service** - <http://www.fws.gov/fire/>
- **USDA Forest Service** - <http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/>
- **National Fire Plan** - <http://www.fireplan.gov/>