

Portland NIMO Team  
Bea Day, Incident Commander

July 8, 2019 — July 19, 2019

# Boundary River and McArthur Creek Fires

## Executive Summary

### Overview

The McArthur Creek Fire was started by lightning on May 21, 2019, 28 miles east of Northway in a limited suppression area. From the beginning, no suppression actions were taken on the incident, however, on June 28, one crew was flown in to plumb some structures on the north end of the fire around the Chips Mine, but the pumps were not activated. The Alaska Division of Forestry in Tok began working with Yukon Wildland Fire Management to monitor the fire's progress.

The Boundary River Fire was started by lightning on June 23, 2019, approximately 10 miles southwest of the village of Northway and 1 mile west of the Nabesna River.

Initially, the Boundary fire received little attention due to limited resources and other higher priority fires in Alaska. An ad hoc Type 3 organization was put in place on June 26th and Gene Phillips, ICT3, assumed command of the fire and began ordering resources. From June 25 to July 1, the fire made runs from 1,000-3,300 acres daily with hot, dry weather conditions accompanied by high winds that sustained a mix of short and long-range spotting fire behavior. Two, Type 2 IA crews were inserted on Friday, June 28 to anchor the fire and begin direct attack. Another crew began working on point protection. By June 29, the fire had jumped containment lines on the southeast corner but had not crossed the Nabesna River. The team's focus was point protection and firefighter safety.

July 1-9 had little growth due to lower temperatures, cloudy/smoky conditions, higher relative humidities, and pulses of precipitation that hit the fire area. By July 1, the helibase was brought online, air support was ordered, and the Type 3 organization settled in for a longer fire, preparing helispots, setting up spike camps, and continuing to protect values at risk.

The established Type 3 organization had made good progress on the Boundary River Fire. However, because of the prediction for continued hot and dry conditions, and the potential for the McArthur Creek Fire to impact the Alaska Highway and allotments, the decision was made by Friday, July 5 to order the Portland NIMO team to manage both fires. The team arrived at noon July 8, and in-briefed at the Dog Musers Hall in Tok at 1300. The Type 3 team members who were available to stay, provided the depth of skills that the NIMO team needed to manage both incidents.

Incident Commander Bea Day assumed command of both fires on July 9, 2019 at 0700. The last significant run occurred on July 10 during red flag weather conditions and there was approximately 1,400 acres of growth. After July 10, the fire area received varying amounts of moisture with storms coming through the area across several days.



## Boundary River and McArthur Creek Fires

Fire Number/Budget Codes:

Boundary River: **AK-TAS-913362**  
**PNMB1V (1502)**

McArthur Creek: **AK-TAS-913133**  
**PNL9HA (1502)**

Location: **Tok, Alaska**

Census Area: **Southeast Fairbanks**

Jurisdiction:

- Alaska Divs. of Forestry—Tok-Copper Area
- Bureau of Land Management
- US Fish and Wildlife
- Tetlin Native Corporation Lands
- Bureau of Indian Affairs

Ordering Office:

- Tok Area Forestry Dispatch Center

Detection Date/Time:

- Boundary River: June 23, 2019 at 4:44 pm
- McArthur Creek: May 21, 2019 at 3:54 pm

Fire Origin:

- Boundary River Lat: 62.859722, Long: 142.236667
- McArthur Creek Lat: 62.996944, Long: 141.060278

Fire Cause: **Lightning**

Date Portland NIMO Team Assumed Command:

- July 8, 2019 at 7:00 pm

Date Command Returned to Local Unit:

- July 19, 2019 at 7:00 am

Contained/Completed: **95 % (Boundary River)**

Final Acres: Boundary River: **18,000 acres**

McArthur Creek: **25,144 acres**

Cost: Boundary River: **\$ 4,143,969** (as of 9/18/19)

McArthur Creek: **\$ 266,032** (as of 9/18/19)



## SUCSESSES

- The Type 3 organization was staffed with highly proficient personnel. PSC3, GISS, and ITSS all stayed and provided the continuity that helped the Planning Section be successful.
- ICP locations both worked well for the Planning Section. There was enough space for people to do their work. The internet and phones were adequate to meet the needs for preparing 209's, making IAP copies and maintaining communication for mobilization and demobilization.
- Local DOF office support – Sylvia Jacobson and Kay Elliott were exceptional assistance for finance regarding tracking resources, creating EERAs, and maintaining the finance packages.
- Tok Area Forestry and personnel were available for close coordination with aircraft and personnel. Due to the remote location, sharing resources was a great advantage to the incident, as well as the Tok Area initial and extended attack on other area fires.
- Tetlin Wildlife FWS jetboats and operators were instrumental to logistical support for operations. Equipment and personnel were reliable and were a high-value mode of transportation.
- Use of the Mobile Emergency Operations Center was an invaluable tool to provide communications and digital data transfer between helibase and ICP.
- An incident specific Tok Area Fires Facebook page was started, and through that, we were able to educate, inform and highlight local efforts. On the page, in only eight days from July 8 to July 16, we had a reach of 34,955 people. We had total page followers of 424 and the reach on a single video story featuring the Northway Camp Crew was 5100. In addition, Tok Forestry also now has a repository of information, fire history and photos of the incident. Incident specific social media works (see Page 7 in this document for more details).
- We made a concerted effort to stay in touch with the Northway Village Corporation leadership daily, to ensure they felt involved and heard. We made sure they had our phone numbers and stopped by every day to talk, answer questions and listen. They seemed to appreciate our visits and we, and the Northway leadership, were grateful to have the help and introductions provided by READ John Grafft.

## STAFFING AT

### MAXIMUM LEVELS

#### Boundary River Fire July 15

Total Personnel	172
Hand Crews – Type 2 IA	3
Hand Crews – Type 2	1
Camp Crews	1
Boats	2
Helicopters – Type 2	2
Helicopters – Type 3	1
Water Tenders	1

#### McArthur Creek Fire July 15

Total Personnel	36
Hand Crews—Type 1	1
Helicopters – Type 2	1

## TRAINEES

### BY SECTION

Command	2
Operations	2
Plans	2
Logistics	2
Finance	5
Information	3

### BY AGENCY

BLM	1
STATE	7
USFS	8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>16</b>





Photo by L. Albertson

### Values at Risk

- Incident responders and the public.
- Structures, facilities, infrastructure, and native allotments near the village of Northway.
- Structures, mining equipment, and native allotments along the Alaska-Canada Highway.
- Relationships with the community, elected officials, cooperators and stakeholders.



## INCIDENT OBJECTIVES

Based on the Delegation of Authority and Leader's Intent provided by the agencies to the IMT, the following incident objectives and incident requirements were developed and included in the Incident Action Plan.

- Provide for firefighter and public safety by utilizing good risk-based strategies to accomplish incident objectives.
- Provide initial attack as requested.
- Protect native allotments and native corporation jurisdictions south of Northway and along the Alaska Highway.
- Provide timely and accurate information about the fire activities to the public and stakeholders.
- Protect the communities of Northway Village, Northway Junction, Port Alcan and Beaver Creek.
- Protect values identified in the Known Sites Database within and around the Tetlin Wildlife Refuge.
- Protect residences, businesses, and infrastructure along the Alaska Highway.

## INCIDENT REQUIREMENTS

### Boundary River Fire

- Keep fire on the west side of the Nabesna River.
- Protect identified, authorized structures within the planning area.
- Protect native allotments at risk.
- Notify BLM if BLM land is likely to be impacted by fire within 48 hours; there is a small BLM parcel near Northway Junction in the planning area.

### McArthur Creek Fire

- Protect permitted structures to the north and south of the fire within the planning area.
- Allow fire to play its natural role in the environment where values are not threatened.
- Protect native allotments to the south of the fire as necessary.
- Gather structure information and determine protection status for structures within the planning area.
- Keep Canadian fire officials informed of fire status.
- Personnel crossing the international border must comply with US and Canadian Customs and Immigration requirements.



## LOGISTICS

Meals Served to Spike	4061
Total Meals Served	1660
Radios loaned out	42



## MEDICAL STATISTICS

Hospital transports	9
Evaluated Patients	10
Patient contacts	27



## PLANS

IAPs copied	1,185
-------------	-------

## SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

- ICP was moved from the Dog Musher's Hall to the Tok School on July 13. This allowed for better space management and fast internet connectivity; the latter was as especially helpful as it allowed the weather forecast process to move smoothly and efficiently.
- Available weather observational data and forecast model data were very limited around this region of the state. The combination of the two made accurate weather forecasting difficult to achieve both in time and space.
- Aerial delivery of operational suppression equipment aided suppression efforts and allowed crews to advance direct line without delay to reduce time and cost.
- Shot guns issued to noncertified fire personnel prior to the arrival of the team were gathered and replaced with bear spray.
- Providing medical response on the fire was addressed by having an EMTP at the helibase for any medical needs.
- Utilization of the Buying Team located in Fairbanks. Although most were federal teams, if they had a delegation from the agency, they would be able to take the workload related to EERA's and Land Use Agreements from creation to close. Coordination from remote locations is exactly what the buying teams are in the business to do.
- The Enterprise Geodata Portal (EGP), which houses the incident Event Geodatabase (GDB), went down on two occasions during this incident. Fortunately, the incident GISS had archived backups of the Event GDB and production was able to continue. However, additional time was needed to create incident products until services were restored.
- The Situation Unit Leader (SITL) identified a potential issue related to the naming of helispots on each incident. Through collaboration with the Air Operations group, ten and one hundred (e.g. H-89, H-102) number designators were used to designate helispots on the Boundary River fire and two hundred (e.g. H-201) number designators were utilized to identify helispots on the McArthur Creek fire.





## CHALLENGES & RESOLUTIONS

- Non-fire support personnel in remote areas presented challenges in accountability. More inclusive briefings provided a more complete understanding of their expectations.
- This incident did not have ready access to production level plotting capability for large format map products. This presented challenges to being able to legibly display the fire area on smaller 11x17 tabloid-sized maps. With collaboration from the Alaska Fire Service GIS employee Dan LaBarre in Fairbanks, base maps and mylar covers were provided to the incident. Fire features could be drawn on top of the mylar sheets covering the base map so a central map table could be utilized to facilitate strategic planning discussions and a large format reference product.
- Better coordination for receiving fixed-wing aircraft activity and costs was needed. A summary of information was not being received in Finance and it was difficult to track down who had the information.
- Evaluate the continued use of the Northway airport as incident command post. This location appears to be commonly used as a helibase and has the infrastructure to accommodate incident management organizations. Communication and connectivity seem to be the barrier but options of investing in more permanent features for cell and/or satellite coverage through grants may help. One example is FirstNet who works with AT&T to build an exclusive communication system for emergency responders. FirstNet communications projects can be funded with grants and can be researched at the following link: <https://allthingsfirstnet.com/grants/>.
- There were several operational periods where instability in the FAMWEB user interface created difficulty in timely submission of the ICS 209. One such instance required intervention with the IA Helpdesk in order to troubleshoot difficulties that occurred when an irreconcilable error was generated. On this occasion, the ICS 209 was not able to be turned in by the 2100 hours deadline for submission.
- The State of Alaska Department of Forestry, Tok Office, provided the plotter for the incident. Their plotter capacity was limited as previous teams had damaged another Forestry Office plotter and it had not been repaired. Recommend that the Tok Forestry office plotters be repaired and maintained so that future incidents can use the plotters.



## OPERATIONS

### SUPPRESSION STATISTICS

	Boundary River	McArthur Creek
Completed line	23.6 miles	0.0 miles
Perimeter distance	28.1 miles	40.5 miles

### SUPPRESSION SUPPORT

	Boundary River	McArthur Creek
Divisions/ Groups	3	4
Helibases	1 (shared)3	1 (shared)
Helispots	15	3
Spike Camps	0	3



### AIR OPERATIONS

Aviation flight hours	305
Water dropped (gallons)	105,248
Passengers	1,145
Pounds of cargo	199,312
Safecoms	1

## CHALLENGES & RESOLUTIONS

- The Mobilization Center in Fairbanks only showed the orientation YouTube videos two times per day; this significantly delayed movement of personnel out to the fire. Recommend that orientation run continuously throughout the day and/or advise incoming personnel to review them on-line.
- Information dissemination is difficult in a small town with no traditional media or other means of messaging. In addition, the State of Alaska's restriction on incident specific social media left us hamstrung. We had to be clear with the State of Alaska PAO, about the need and reasons for having such a Facebook page and we were given leeway to build one. Besides in person visits, this became a valuable tool as it was our only way of communicating with visitors and residents about the status of the fire. **Recommendation:** Serious consideration should be given to challenging the state AOP which restricts such tools.
- It wasn't possible to have the traditional "stakeholders" meeting but there were still key community people that needed to be kept informed. However, local relations with the native people of Northway was sometimes difficult because of a past history with Tok Forestry. Many encounters ended up being not about the fire, but about the lack of economic decisions benefitting residents of Northway. **Recommendation:** While its likely already planned, an off season meeting to air concerns and find a way for each entity to benefit, could help bridge the gap.





## Public Information

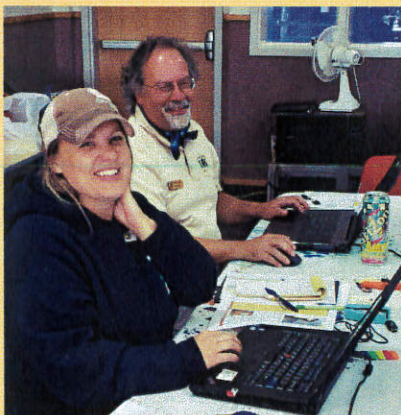
### FACEBOOK

*Stats from July 8th to July 16th; 8:00 pm*

Total Reach	34,955
Total Engagement	13,071
Total Video Views	5,939
Page Likes	487
Shares	470
Page Views	1,112
Total Reactions	4,445

### TRADITIONAL OUTREACH

Phone Calls Received	20
Trapline Locations	20
Avg Daily Trapline Miles	130
Total Trapline Miles	1000+
In-Person Contacts	340



### COMMUNITY STATISTICS

Northway Residents	250—300
Tok Residents	1300
Cooperators	6

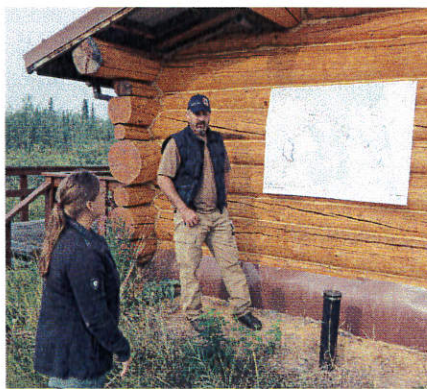
### VALUES THREATENED

Structures	94
Allotments	40



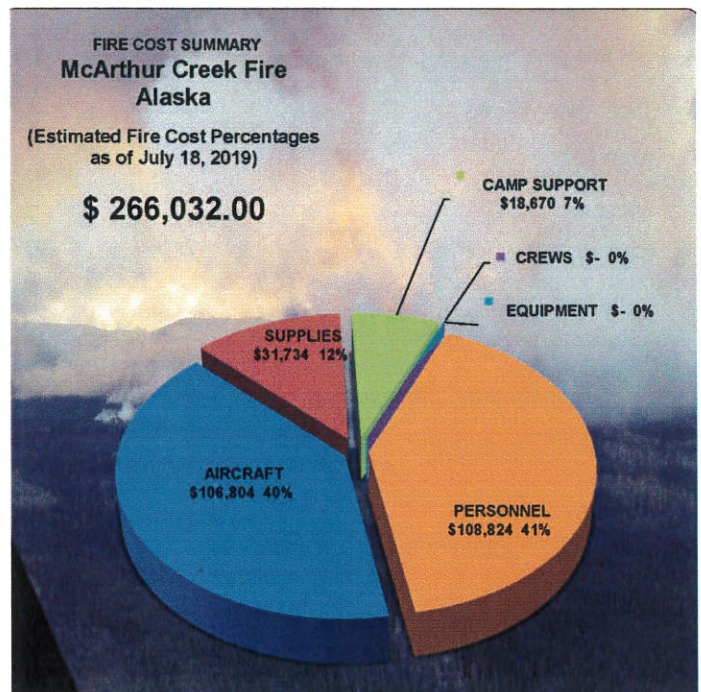
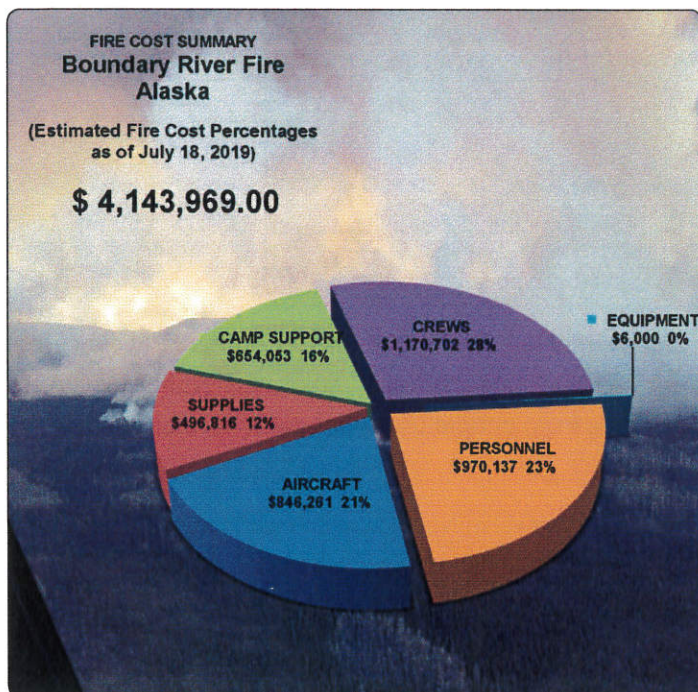
The IMT found the community welcoming though not particularly concerned about either the Boundary River or McArthur Creek Fire, but there were comments in the beginning from people unsure about where to find information.

- Two public meetings were held in Northway and one in Tetlin all before NIMO took the fire. The Northway meetings had about 22 to 25 people while no one attended the meeting in Tetlin.
- Community people told us they did not like and would not use AKFIREINFO information sources as there were so many fires posting that they couldn't find what they wanted.
- Out of necessity, we made a serious argument for the use of an incident specific Facebook page and began one. We got a great deal of verbal thanks from Northway, Tok and the visitor centers. QR codes on cards and boards helped with tourists and residents.
- Operational briefing videos were posted daily with captioning and cross-posted on AKFIRINFO. These had a large number of viewers - between 500 and 1000 views each.

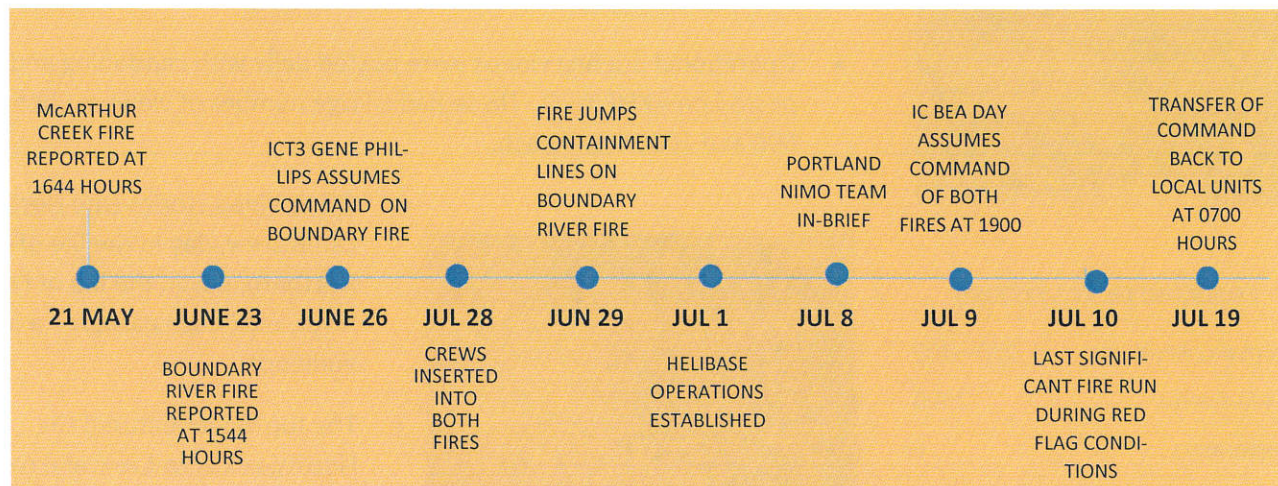


- Other video stories (the Northway camp crew, day in the life of Great Northern, day in the life of Feather River, etc.) each garnered a large audience.
- The top video featured the Northway Camp Crew and had a reach of 5,200.
- The top post was an evening update on July 11th which contained pictures of and from the Great Northern Crew. With 1793 engagements and a reach of 9,662.

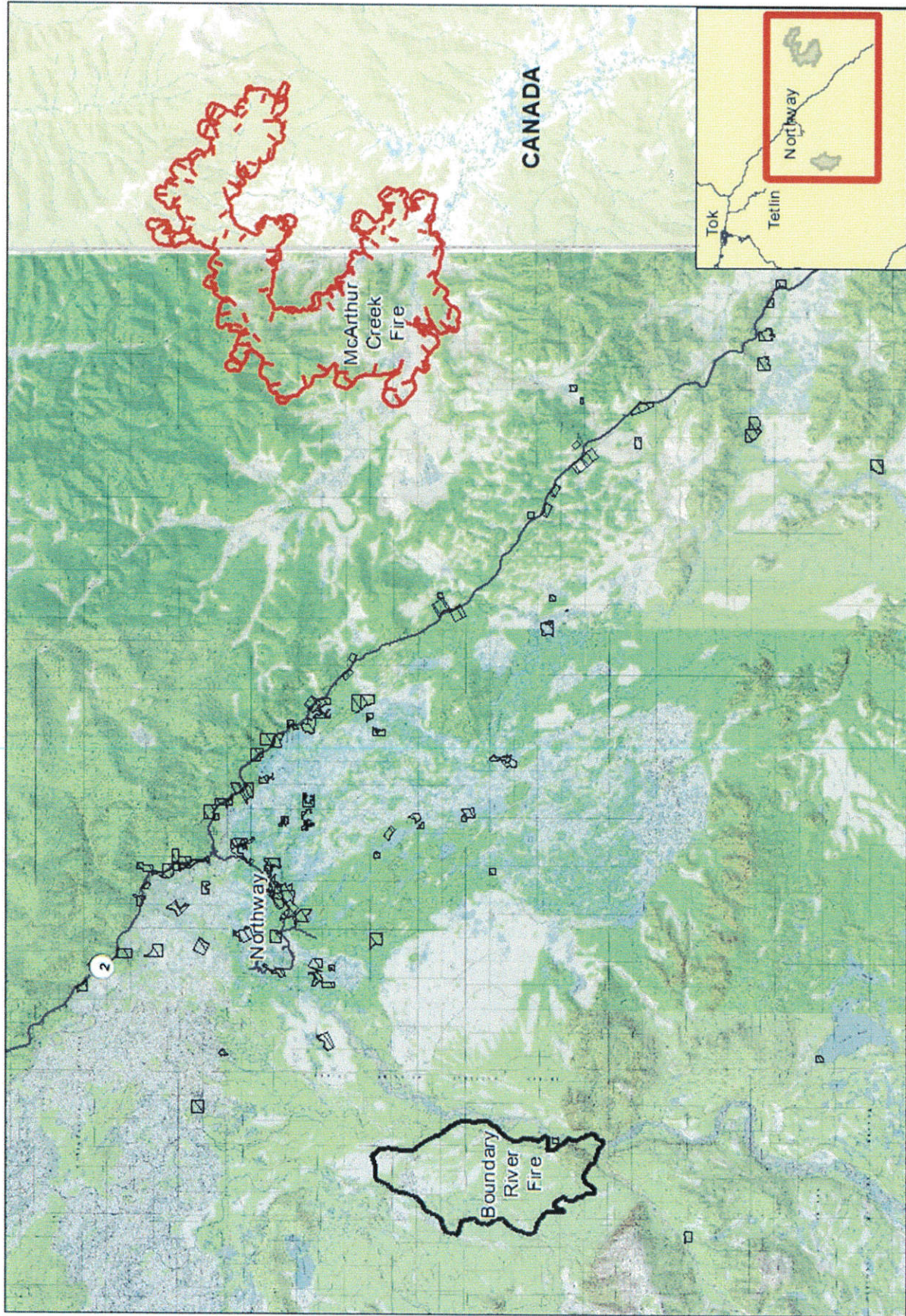




## INCIDENT TIMELINE







**Boundary River - 362 and McArthur Creek - 133**

**Vicinity Map**

Boundary River - 18,000 acres and McArthur Creek - 25,144 acres

- Alaska Native Allotments
- Main Roads
- Uncontrolled Fire Edge
- Completed Line



