

INCIDENT SUMMARY

ISOM CREEK FIRE, AK-UYD-187

June 5th—June 21st, 2020

Alaska Black Team, Type 2 IMT
Ed Sanford, Incident Commander
Tom Kurth, Deputy Incident Commander



TIMELINE

The Isom Creek Fire was detected on June 5th by a recon flight returning from Fort Yukon. Initial attack included 3 loads of Alaska Smoke-jumpers. The fire grew rapidly on June 5th, 6th, and 7th, eventually slopping over the Dalton Highway. This prompted the order of an Alaska Type 2 Incident Management Team and other single resource personnel. The Black Type 2 Team assumed command of the fire on June 11 at 08:00.

Effective suppression held the slopover at the Trans-Alaska Pipeline and westward spread was contained with a burnout along a spur trail ("Hovercraft Road") down to the Yukon River. Growth to the east on June 8 through June 13th brought the fire into the 2004 Waldron Creek fire scar, causing concern that the fire would continue spreading and threaten allotments along the south shore of the Yukon river.

Cooler, cloudy weather on June 14th slowed the fire, and precipitation on the morning of the 16th dampened fire behavior and provided opportunities for the Alaska Black Team to continue with suppression actions, mopup, line prep, and allotment assessments along the Yukon River.

On Thursday June 18th, Operational, Logistical and Safety resources were in place to begin burn operations along the eastern edge of the fire to reduce the chance of fire escaping past control lines. This would also greatly reduce the chance of the fire burning into the 2004 fire scar. Due to increased rain and lower temperatures on the 18th, the burn operations were postponed.

With additional rain and cooler weather in the forecast for the weekend, it was decided on June 19th that the fire would transition back to a local Alaska Type 3 organization on Monday June 22nd at 07:00. Before transitioning, the Alaska Black Team ensured that the burn plan was in place for the east side of the fire so that it can be carried out in the future if fuels become burnable again and it becomes necessary.

All suppression activities along the west and southern edges of the fire were completed and those areas were placed in patrol status.

The incoming Type 3 organization shadowed the Alaska Black Team on Sunday June 21st to gain situational awareness and determine what resources and overhead would be available after the transition.

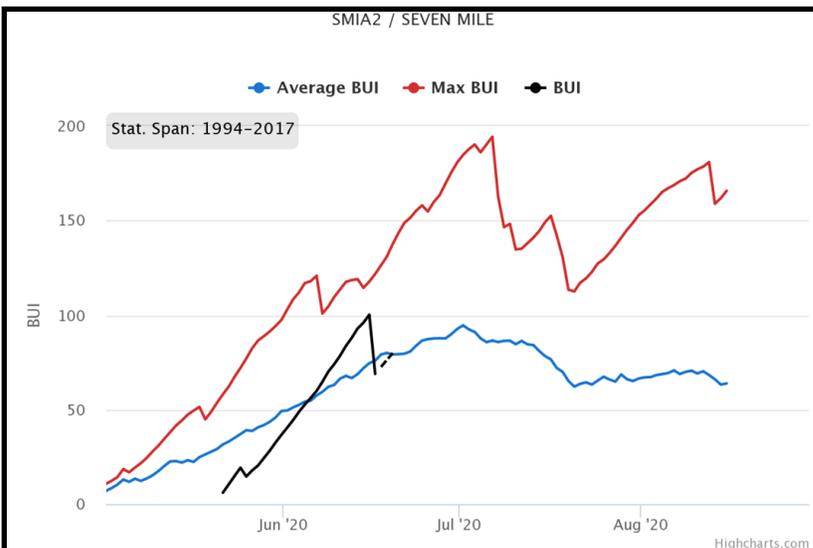


Fire Behavior Summary:

- Significant growth on wildfires in the first two weeks of June is early for the Upper Yukon Protection Zone. However this area, on the western edge of the zone, is not typical of the flats that are subject to permafrost and early season soil saturation. Fire burned aggressively, but not deeply overall.
- The surrounding area has been extensively burned, with fires from 1990, 1993, 2004, 2005, 2015, and 2019. Though fire scars are typically seen as impediments to fire spread, the Isom Creek fire burned into the 2004 Waldron Creek fire scar on June 13th after 18 consecutive rain-free days of drying.
- Fire spread was carried largely in spruce cover with torching and spotting as well as active crown fire commonly observed. Satellite imagery suggests that small springs, seeps, and drainages were wet enough to resist surface spread in many areas.
- Extreme Fine Fuel Moisture Codes (FFMC) of 93-94 were reached and there were Very High Buildup Index (BUI) levels (80-100) while the fire was actively growing. Spruce adjective ratings reached Very High for the first time on June 7th, when the fire grew from 50 to 1500 acres.

Fire Weather Summary:

- There was a heavy snowpack the start of the fire season, though there were many warm dry days to melt the snow in May.
- Seasonal convective storm activity was on time, with increases in thunderstorm frequency and coverage reaching the Upper Yukon Protection Zone in early June. Some cells have been remarkably strong.
- Weak high pressure has persisted over the eastern interior, feeding frequent disturbances that produced daily thunderstorms, sometimes over the fire with lightning, and other times affecting the fire with outflow winds. One instance of hail was observed.
- The synoptic winds were not strong while the fire was burning actively. However, gustiness associated with thunderstorm outflows pushed the fire through heavy fuels from a variety of directions.
- Often wind down in the terrain was thermally driven. Sometimes the ridgetop winds were also caused by thermals on the ridges.



COMMAND

The Incident Command Post (ICP) was located at Tanana Valley Middle School in Fairbanks, and a Forward Operating Base (FOB) was established at the BLM 5-Mile Campground. The campground is located at Milepost 60 on the Dalton Highway, 141 miles from Fairbanks and the ICP. The bulk of the suppression resources were located there, along with logistical support. The drive was a 2 ½ hour to 3 ½ hour undertaking dependent on conditions. Facilities along the highway are scarce and self-sufficiency is important to those driving as tire flats were frequent and cell phone coverage often nonexistent.

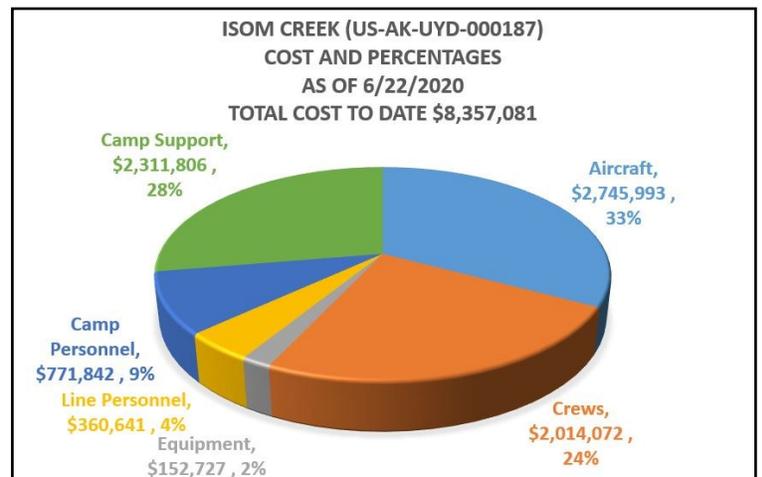
Agency Administration – Agency Administration input was orchestrated from ICP via teleconference. Input from 5-Mile was solicited every day and focused on operational input. Field trips from cooperators and Resource Advisors were regularly scheduled. Resource advisors were often in camp and interfaced directly with IMT members at the 5-Mile Camp.

Cooperator Interaction – Interaction with cooperators was divided between Agency Administrators at ICP and operational assistance at 5-Mile. While limited in numbers, their participation operationally was directly related to firefighter safety and welfare.

Primary cooperation was from Alyeska Pipeline Services, Pump 6, Lou Cardona. She arranged for repair to entryway and water access with material, equipment and operation. Alaska Department of Transportation (DOT) contributed early on with flagging, road sign construction, and traffic safety. Grading of roads took place in the vicinity of the 5-Mile Camp, helibase, and areas of high traffic on the Dalton Highway. A flagging crew provided temporary road closure services at the request of the team. In addition, they also constructed and contributed numerous signs, placed at turnoffs, crew camping areas, and congested areas.

COVID-19 Mitigations – 5 Mile FOB

The incident was the first in Alaska for large fire and team oversight during the pandemic. Extensive pre-work discussion had taken place regarding mitigations for COVID. The forward operating base was at the forefront for observation of these applica-



OPERATIONS



Key Decisions

- Absorption of existing Type 3 leadership and operational plan into the Type 2 organization allowed continuity and a relatively seamless transition for the firefighters.
- Operations split geographically and operationally between field and planning functions

Notable Successes

- Absorption of most of Type 3 Team.
- Use of an AT&T remote tower allowed AT&T users to have very good connectivity.
- Aircraft were utilized heavily to slow the fire's progression before ground resources were in place.
- Engine Task Force Coordinator expedited fills on engine requests. Recommends continuation, especially at PL3 or higher.
- Isom Creek Air Operations aided in the suppression of one initial attack fire within the Tanana Zone as well as fire support on three fires in the Upper Yukon Zone. All support was charged to the appropriate incident.

Challenges and Resolutions

- Only phones on AT&T system could access the remote tower. Preplan to have phones available in future if using AT&T.
- COVID-19 protocols slowed arrival to incident.
- Both teams had difficulty getting adequate vehicles. Need to have a more robust fleet available to meet demand and activate NERV program early.

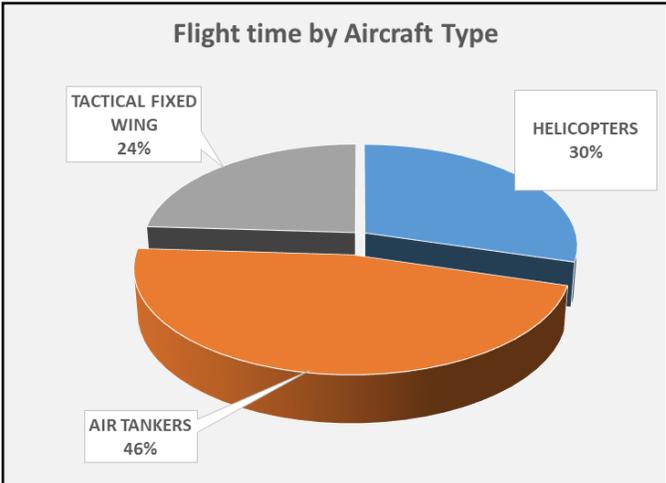
Resources (Peak): 357

- Type 1 Crews: 4
- Type 2IA Crews: 3
- Type 2 Crews: 5
- Engines: 11
- Water Tenders: 3
- Overhead: 115



Air Operations

- Water Delivered: 883,129 gals.
- Retardant Delivered: 66,178 gals.
- Cargo Delivered : 115,277 lbs.
- Passengers: 295
- Flight Time: 517 hours
- UAS: 33 missions
- 596 minutes



LOGISTICS



Key Decisions

- Setting up repeaters to facilitate communications from the ICP to 5-Mile Camp.
- Using the Forward Operating Base model, setting up communication and medical to run as if they were at an ICP.

Notable Successes

- Chain saw parts pre-approval
- Daily Zoom meeting with expanded dispatch, buying team, and the Incident Business Advisor.
- New and improved food box order worksheet that should streamline and be beneficial for future use.

Challenges and Resolutions

- Maintaining a steady flow of heavy-duty vehicles for a rapidly expanding fire located nearly four hours away from central ICP in Fairbanks.
- Phone and internet communication at 5-Mile Camp. One resolution is to set up a new Alaska Fire Service contract with First Net.
- No drivers between ICP and FOB for several days delayed the exchange of supplies, water samples, mail, etc.

SAFETY

Key Decisions

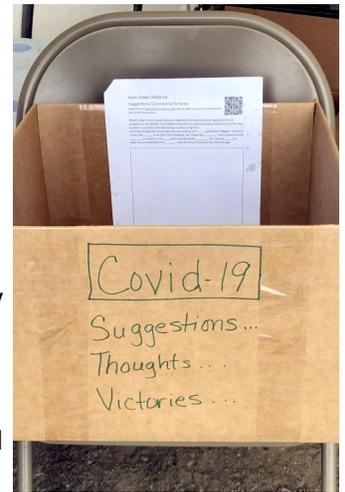
Placing the order for Wind River Bear Institute bear dogs, ordering line safety early, and ordering DOT road guard/traffic control

Notable Successes

- Wind River Bear Institute!
- Boat operations, PFDs and BTOPs
- No OSHA reportable lost time injuries

Significant Challenges and Resolutions

- COVID-19 issues. Possibly identify a team member dedicated to dealing with COVID-19, perhaps Human Resources. Possibly consider a moratorium on communal food and coolers.



SHARED EXPERIENCES

Isom Creek was notable for several situations that required flexibility and patience for all: a global pandemic, introduction of new technology, and new databases. This was the first team fire using the new ordering system, IROC. It was also the first time an Alaska IMT used Microsoft (MS) Teams for an incident.

Notable Successes

- Successful use of people working virtually and communicating among multiple locations via MS Teams calls, Go-to-Meeting, and Zoom. 106 resources used the new virtual check-in process.
- Social distancing and use of face masks to reduce COVID-19 transmission.

Significant Challenges and Resolutions

- Mixed messaging regarding COVID-19 testing and isolation requirements for out of state resources led to delayed arrivals at work locations. Consider prepositioning primary team members from out of state when appropriate.
- Learning curve for using MS Teams. Training should be provided prior to mobilization.
- Multiple communication methods could be overwhelming. Communication disconnects at times between ICP, FOB, and virtual workers. Exacerbated by connectivity issues at FOB.

Supply Statistics

559 Fresh Food Boxes

91 Pumps

25 Chainsaw Kits

19 Miles of Hose

13 Collapsible/Folding Tanks

398 Fuel Cans (5 gal.)

8 Fuel Drums (55 gal.)

Safety Statistics June 8-18

Treated and Released – Medical

Stomach	5
Headaches	5
Foot Care	5
Muscular	3
Soft issue injuries	9
Burns	1
Skeletal	6
Insect Bites	4
Allergies	1

PUBLIC INFORMATION

The Alaska Black Team Public Information Officers (PIOs) managed the informational needs of the area affected by Isom Creek Fire (June 11-22, 2020). PIOs utilized both high and low tech methods to develop and deliver timely fire information based on emerging issues and community concerns that were in alignment with leaders' intent.

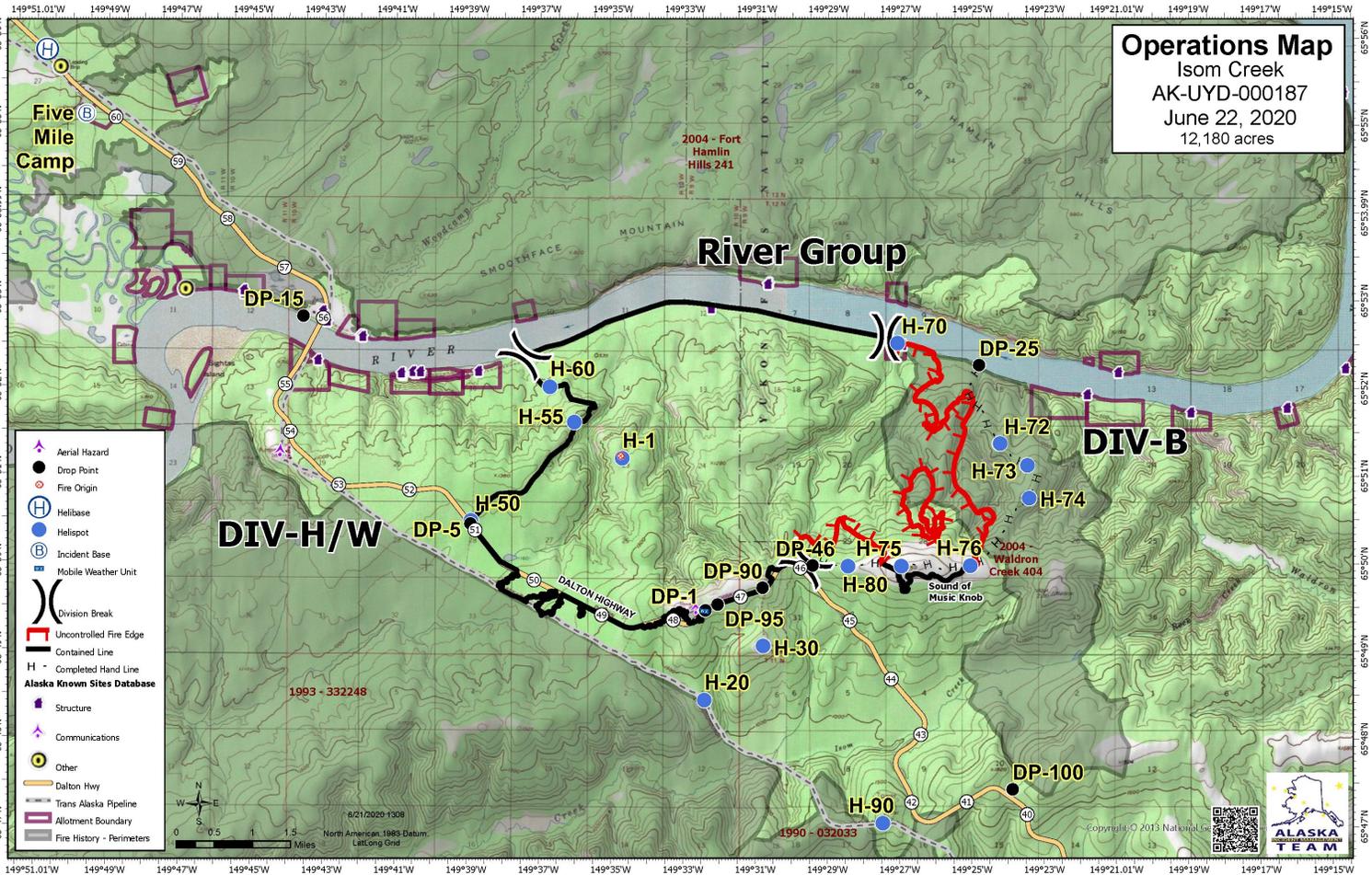
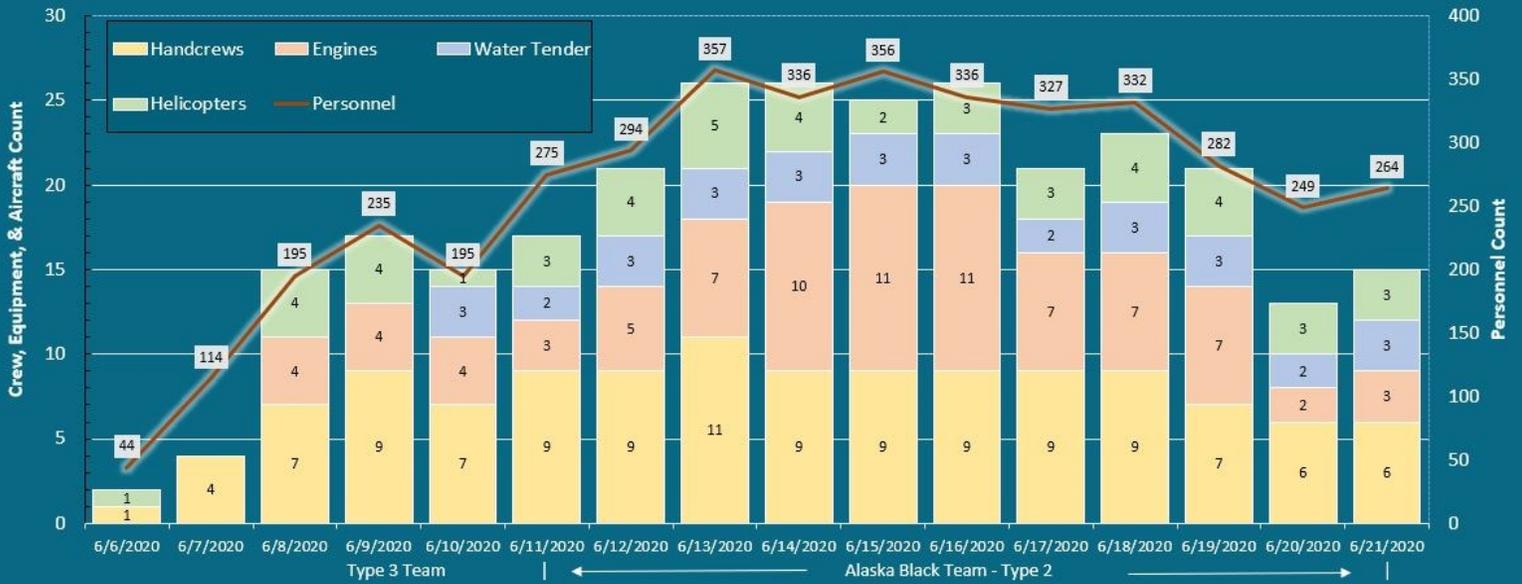
Key PIO Talking Points (not in order of importance)

- The Alaska Type 2 Incident Management Black Team assumed command on June 11, 2020, to coordinate efforts to protect Native allotments and minimize impacts to the Dalton Highway, trans-Alaska pipeline and Alyeska Pump Station Six.
- The Dalton Highway is open. Drivers are asked to use extreme caution between mileposts 42-62 and drive slowly with headlights on.
- Drivers need to be prepared for low visibility due to smoke and to watch for firefighting personnel and equipment along the roadway.
- Drivers are asked to not stop on the highway and to instead utilize turnouts outside of mileposts 42-62.
- The Yukon River Camp, north of the Yukon River Bridge at milepost 56, remains open for food, fuel and lodging.
- In the early stages of active fire behavior, the fire crossed the Dalton Highway from the side of origin and reached the trans-Alaska pipeline, which remains undamaged as it was designed to withstand wildfires.
- Firefighting personnel are well briefed on safe practices for operating during the COVID-19 pandemic. Personnel are wearing facemasks when in close proximity and are maintaining social distancing. Crews are camping separate from each other to minimize exposure.
- Karelian bear dogs were used to mitigate human-bear conflicts in areas such as spike camps and firefighter operations.
- Continue to provide information via AKFireInfo.com, the BLM Alaska Fire Service and DNR Alaska Division of Forestry Facebook pages.

Facebook Posts Engagements: 69.8K
Facebook Video Views: 25.9K
Inciweb Posts: 11
Inciweb Photos: 15
AKFireInfo Views: 8.8k
AKFireInfo Posts: 14



Isom Creek Resources Timeline



Progression Map

Isom Creek
 AK-UYD-000187
 June 22, 2020

12,180 acres



Fire Origin - 6/05/2020 3:19 pm

Date	Acres Growth
6/06/2020	58
6/07/2020	1535
6/09/2020	7574
6/10/2020	10379
6/12/2020	11665
6/13/2020	12024
6/19/2020	12179



Erin Nowakovich
 6/22/2020 09:25
 Acres from Sentinel & GPS
 North American 1983 Datum, LantLong GHD

