

BOF encourages Alaskans to act after hot and smoky summer of fire

The Alaska Board of Forestry meets three times a year, and once a year takes a fieldtrip to gain a deeper understanding of important forestry issues around the state. This year's late-August fieldtrip took them to the wildland fires burning in Willow, and the Board felt that the information they learned about fire safety, preparedness, and policy should be shared broadly.

The 2019 fire season was unusually long. Normally, Alaska's wildfires occur early in the summer, beginning as grass fires before green-up. Rain and cooling weather in late July and August slows wildland fires. This year, though, southcentral Alaska didn't get those rains, moss layers and duff continued to dry out, and fires continued to ignite and burn throughout the summer. To top it off, a windstorm in mid-August caused several fires to flare up and spread dramatically through the very dry landscape in the Mat-Su Region and on the Kenai Peninsula.



Usually Alaska's fire crews are assisted by Lower 48 crews in the early summer, and as Alaska's fire season winds down, we send our crews south to help other states as their fire season escalates in the later summer months. Luckily for Alaska, though, fires in the western states never heated up, so out-of-state crews remained to help fight Alaskan fires even into August and September. In contrast, the summer of 2018 was an unusually slow fire season in Alaska, with rains and cool weather throughout the summer keeping fires from burning, so our crews were able to assist with the record-breaking fire season in the Lower 48.

This fortunate balance in wildland fire over the last two years caused the Board of Forestry to ask: **What happens when Alaska and the Lower 48 have a big fire season? How can we prepare better for big fire years in which we must rely solely on Alaskan crews?**



McKinley Fire, August 26, 2019

1. **BE FIREWISE.** The most important thing individuals can do is to create defensible space around their communities, homes and property, following Firewise principles. Firefighters do not have the resources to defend every home during a wildfire, so a house that has flammable trees and brush cleared around it according to Firewise principles gives firefighters space to set up systems to protect it. When adequately prepared, a house can withstand a wildland fire even without the intervention of the fire service. After the unusually hot and smoky summer of 2019, we have an opportunity to take advantage of the increased awareness of fire danger, and encourage all

Alaskans to make their homes Firewise. Firewise Communities/USA encourages communities and homeowners to prepare for a fire before it occurs: <http://forestry.alaska.gov/fire/firewise.htm>.



Kenai Peninsula Borough – 2019 Wildland Fire Evacuation Guide

LEVEL 1: READY	LEVEL 2: SET	LEVEL 3: GO	ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Level 1 means BE READY for potential evacuation. There is a fire in your local area. Create a plan to transport and care for family members with mobility needs, pets or livestock. Monitor social media, news and radio for current Ready-Set-Go! information in your area. Relocate flammable tanks and supplies away from your home and outbuildings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Level 2 means BE SET (ready) to evacuate. You must be ready & prepared to leave at a moment's notice! Level 2 signifies that there is significant danger in your area. Load your 6-Ps and 7-day kit into your vehicle. Relocate to a designated shelter or with family/friends living outside of the affected area. Shelter locations will be announced during this time. You MAY have time to gather necessary items. However, REMEMBER you must be prepared and ready to relocate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Level 3 means GO! Evacuate NOW!! Leave immediately! The danger in your area is current and you should evacuate immediately. DO NOT delay leaving. Do not gather belongings. Do not make efforts to protect your home. LEAVE IMMEDIATELY! Drive calmly and pay special attention to emergency vehicles and directional signs. Do not block roadways for emergency vehicles or other evacuees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you know the alternate ways out of your neighborhood? BLOW DOWN: During an evacuation, roads become congested with vehicles. Visibility may be impaired due to dust or smoke making the evacuation a slow process. Let's work together to safely leave the evacuated areas. Monitor social media, news, and local radio for the "Re-Entry" notifications. Re-entry may be done in phases.
<p>Actions Before and During WILDLAND FIRE SEASON</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepare an Alaska 7-day emergency kit: http://www.akstate.gov Register mobile phones to receive emergency notification calls and text messages at: http://www.akstate.gov Designate an "out of area contact" who can relay information. Make a list of your "6-Ps" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create defensible spaces and remove fuel hazards around your home: http://www.akstate.gov/forestry/defensiblespaces Know the evacuation plans for family members in assisted living and children facilities. Always keep vehicle fuel tanks 1/2 full and READY to go. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you have time, write "EVACUATED" on a yellow note and hang it at the end of your driveway as you leave your property. Get all plans and preparedness done by Level 2. This may be the ONLY advance notice you have to finish getting ready to evacuate when notified. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This will be the last notice you will receive during the evacuation LEVEL 3 	<p>For current fire behavior information call: 208-391-3488</p> <p>Swan Lake Fire - https://www.akstate.gov/forestry Reporting Agencies Network - http://akfire.com Fires in Alaska - Facebook.com/AKForestry Fires in Alaska - https://twitter.com/akfire</p> <p>KPB Information Call Center 807-282-3100 (4630) Operation hours are listed at http://www.kpboem.com</p> <p>If you have trouble registering for alert notifications, email com/dtpps or call 807-282-INFO (4636)</p>
	<p>Need extra time? Don't wait. GO early! Remember the "6-Ps"</p> <p>People, Pets, Pills, Photos, Personal (computer, backup info) and Important Papers</p> <p>Don't call 9-1-1 for "non-emergencies"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Check-in at a designated shelter. Whether you stay or not, "check-in" will help others know that you are safe. Take pets to a designated PET Evacuation Center. Do not attempt to re-enter the fire area until it is declared safe to do so. KPB alerts emergency notification system will call registered mobile phones when it is safe to return to your property. Monitor social media, news, and radio for the "Re-Entry" notifications. 	

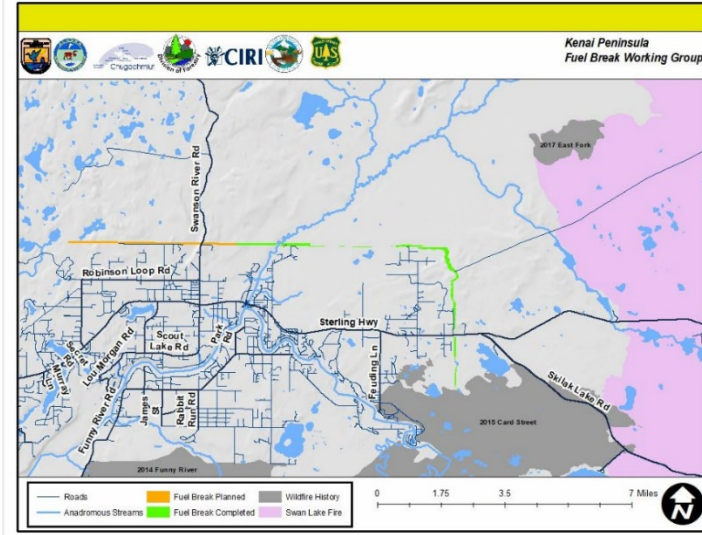
2. LEARN BEFORE YOU BURN. The Division of Forestry has begun a multi-year statewide public education campaign promoting several wildland fire

prevention-focused programs, including DOF's new burn permits, Firewise, Ready-Set-Go evacuation guides, forest stewardship, spruce bark beetle impact mitigation, and newly adopted laws and regulations. The goal is a 10% annual decrease in human-caused wildfires in DOF wildland-urban interface protection areas in the next four years.



Previously constructed fuel break

3. BUILD FUEL BREAKS. The State of Alaska should create fuel breaks in key locations near communities at risk from fire. Fuel breaks have been proven to be highly effective and economical compared to the cost of fire suppression and property damage. However, no State money is currently being spent to create or maintain fuel breaks. The fuel breaks that exist in the state today were created with funds from federal grants, and while Alaska has been highly successful at obtaining these grants, we compete with 15 other Western states for federal funds. Last year we received the maximum amount of grant funding allowed per state: approximately \$2 million. If the State were to budget some money for fuel breaks, the Division could leverage those funds to apply for even more federal grants, protecting our communities better and saving the state money in the long run.



Fuel break success stories. Cutting and maintaining fuel breaks costs money, but it pays off when they help firefighters protect lives, homes and property. Fuel breaks have helped stop several fires from spreading into communities since fuel reduction work began in 2001: the 2019 Shovel Creek and Swan Lake fires, the Funny River fire in 2014, and the Eagle Trail fire in 2010.

- a. The Shovel Creek Fire threatened five subdivisions and more than 160 homes in Fairbanks in late June and early July 2019, but the fuel break along the Old Murphy Dome Road enabled firefighters to stop the fire from spreading into the community.
- b. Also during the summer of 2019, the 10-mile long Sterling fuel break (photo and map at left) around the

east and north sides of Sterling was improved for public and firefighter safety, and played an important role in protecting the community from the Swan Lake Fire.

c. In May of 2014, the Funny River Fire threatened thousands of homes in Soldotna, Funny River, Kasilof and Sterling. When the fire met two fuel breaks along the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, it slowed, buying firefighters valuable time and space to conduct burnout operations around several subdivisions. In the past 10 years, every \$1 spent on the fuels treatment at or near Kenai Refuge produced about \$165 worth of structures protected. [*Refuge Update*, Sept/Oct 2014]

d. In 2010, the Eagle Trail Fire made a run toward the village of Tanacross. Fortunately, shaded fuel breaks had been cut around the community in the early and mid-2000s, and a firefighter crew placed in the break was able to protect the village. The fuel breaks were installed by BLM and Tanana Chiefs Conference, and were some of the first fuel reduction work conducted in Alaska.



4. SUPPORT OUR FIRE CREWS. The Division of Forestry is pleased to report that our Type I Hotshot Firefighting Crew, Pioneer Peak, has recently been granted permanent seasonal status, meaning that these highly-trained and valuable employees have job security. The positions are not funded with state money. Instead, the Division of Forestry must use federal grants obtained for the fuels reduction projects mentioned above to pay for fire crew positions when they are not actively fighting fires. The same is true for Alaska's four Type 21A crews: White Mountain, Gannett Glacier, Yukon and Tanana Chiefs Conference. Though the Division of Forestry has been quite successful at winning federal

grants, from year to year, the amount of funding fluctuates. If the State of Alaska funded at least part of these positions, we could maintain a more consistent level of funding, and leverage this State money as match to procure even more federal funds for fuel breaks to protect our communities before fires threaten them.

In addition to the agency and agency-sponsored crews referred to above, villages throughout Alaska have historically kept Type 2 emergency firefighter crews ready to deploy. In 2013, 60 crews were ready to deploy, but since then, numbers have dropped precipitously, with only eight village crews remaining. Fewer local village crews mean that Alaska must call sooner for out-of-state assistance than in the past. The Board of Forestry applauds the sincere appreciation and consideration that Alaska's fire-affected communities have shown towards firefighting crews and operations in their areas.

Why this update from the Board of Forestry?

The late summer fires of 2019 in the Mat-Su Region created a unique opportunity for the Board of Forestry to see what a fire in the wildland-urban interface looks like. At their August 2019 meeting, the Board decided to begin producing updates to disseminate relevant information gleaned from their meetings. The Board will share these briefings with the public and elected officials to help with decision-making at all levels, from an individual landowner's choices to policy decisions at the State level.

This issue addressed how an individual's most valuable contribution to wildland fire safety for themselves and their community is by making their own property and neighborhood Firewise. At a larger scale, the Board encourages State government to provide funding for fuel breaks and firefighters to leverage further federal funding that will protect vulnerable communities around Alaska.

The Alaska Board of Forestry is a diverse group of stakeholders¹ that makes recommendations on forest practices issues, monitors the effectiveness and implementation of the Alaska Forest Practices Act, and addresses research needs for forestry issues as they arise. This diverse Board must reach a high degree of consensus to act: an affirmative vote by all but one of the voting members is required.

¹ The Board of Forestry is comprised of representatives from commercial fishing, environmental, mining, and recreation organizations; an Alaska Native corporation, and a forest industry trade association, along with a non-governmental professional forester and a professional fish/wildlife biologist. The Board is chaired by the Alaska State Forester who is a non-voting member.
Board of Forestry Update: January 2020