

## Using fire as a land management tool on the Refuge

by Doug Newbould

All fires that burn live and/or dead vegetation on public and private lands are now called “wildland fires”, whether caused by lightning, arson, a careless cigarette, a landowner burning waste, or a land management agency implementing a prescribed burn plan. Unwanted wildland fires are still known as “wildfires.” The national fire management community is now using the term, “fire use,” for what used to be known as “prescribed fire” or “controlled burning.”

Whatever you might call it, fire can be a very effective land management tool when used properly. It can also be very destructive, as we saw in California a few days ago when several homes were destroyed by a prescribed fire that escaped its planned boundaries. And of course, there was Yellowstone Park in 1988, when lightning fires were allowed to burn for many weeks before any suppression action was begun...and the entire face of one of our national treasures was changed for a lifetime.

While these headline-making events remind us of the dangers of wildfire, it is unfortunate that they also may cause a great deal of fear among the general populace. We all need to have a healthy respect for the destructive nature of fire, but I don't believe it is good for us to fear fire. Fear is a powerful emotion, and it can be the root of an even more powerful one — panic.

You may remember the scenes from Oakland several years ago, when a brush fire swept through subdivisions destroying hundreds of homes, and panicked residents created such a gridlock in the streets that firefighters and other emergency services could not respond to the incident.

Panic is most definitely not the response we want when the next wildfire threatens neighborhoods here on the Kenai Peninsula. We all need to react quickly, but calmly and intelligently to every emergency. And the way we can achieve that kind of measured, cool-headed response is through planning and practice. Every home, every neighborhood and every community needs an emergency response plan for fires, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, power outages, and floods. And then we all need to practice, practice, practice. If you are unsure how to go about making such plans, contact your local fire department or local government

office for help.

I got off on a bit of a rabbit trail there - a worthwhile pursuit I think, but let's get back to the subject of fire use. Fire has been used as a management tool for many centuries in North America. Indian tribes on the Great Plains set prairie fires to regenerate grasslands and to control wildfires. The Ute tribe used fire about once every seven years to control regeneration in stands of lodgepole pine, a commodity they used for trade with other tribes. Today, land managers throughout North America are using fire to reduce hazardous buildup of forest fuels, to improve wildlife habitats, and as an ecosystem management tool - to re-establish historic fire regimes and landscape vegetation patterns.

Here on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, we are using fire to reduce hazard fuel buildups and to create a fuelbreak along Funny River Road. Some of the smoke you saw and smelled over the Fourth of July weekend was from a prescribed fire we ignited on July 1<sup>st</sup> in the Mystery Creek area.

The Mystery Creek project area is located about seven miles north of the Sterling Highway, between the Moose River and the Kenai Mountains. The objectives of this prescribed burn are to: 1) reduce black spruce hazard fuel east of Sterling; 2) improve browse for moose and hares by regenerating hardwoods (birch, aspen and willow); and 3) provide opportunities for training and research during the implementation of the burn plan.

Since the middle of June, we have successfully completed Unit 4 of the project, with about 450 acres burned. We hope to complete units 5 and 6 in the coming weeks. We will do our best to keep you informed of our progress, so when you see a smoke column in the Mystery Creek area, you'll know that we are making progress on the burn plan. If you have any questions or comments about the fire management program at the Refuge, or about developing a response plan for your home or neighborhood, please call me or Larry Adams at 260-5994.

*Doug Newbould is the Assistant Fire Management Officer at the [Kenai National Wildlife Refuge](#).*