

Refuge fire manager uses off-season for reflection and planning

by Doug Newbould

As we begin a New Year, many of us find ourselves looking back over the events, the challenges and accomplishments of the past twelve months—even as we prepare our plans for the year ahead. Since March, refuge employees have written approximately forty articles about the wonderful lands, the wildlife and the people of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. I believe I can speak for all at the refuge when I say, “Thanks a lot” to the *Peninsula Clarion* for giving us the chance to share our work with you. Our hope is these articles will help you better understand your local wildlife refuge and its mission.

Everything I have heard so far indicates the column has been successful. So until the *Clarion* pulls the plug or we run out of things to say, we will be happy to continue.

Some of you might be interested to know what a fire manager does in the off-season, when he or she is not out fighting wildland fires or using fire to reduce hazard fuels and improve wildlife habitat. The short answer to that question is reflect and ponder. We reflect on the successes and failures of the past, and ponder the actions we must take in the future. The biggest challenge for me is that both reflecting and pondering tend to require a great deal of paperwork.

Some people might think that Smokey the Bear hibernates every winter like any normal bear. Au contraire! I’ll have you know that Smokey is a personal friend of mine, and we have had many a discussion about the amount of paperwork a fire manager must complete these days.

The truth is that Smokey and I cannot afford to relax in the off-season. We have to get ready for the next fire season. There is equipment to repair and replace. There are fire management meetings and training sessions to attend. There are seasonal firefighters to hire. There are budgets, fire management plans and burn plans to prepare. There are schools and students to visit. The list goes on. The fact is that fire management on the refuge and everywhere else, is a full-time, year-round job.

I want to tell you about some of the fire man-

agement accomplishments of 1999, and some of the things we are planning for 2000. Last year, we successfully burned about 400 acres of black spruce forest out at Mystery Creek. The primary objective of the prescribed burn plan at Mystery Creek is to reduce the hazards of wildland fire by converting large continuous stands of black spruce to less flammable species like birch, willow and aspen. When we accomplish our primary objective, we receive the additional benefit of improving winter habitat for moose and hare. Five units (about 4000 acres) remain to be burned at Mystery Creek, and our plan is to complete as many of those burn units as possible in 2000.

The other major accomplishment of 1999 was the Funny River Road Hazard Fuel Reduction Project. Between April and August, refuge firefighters successfully burned about three thousand slash piles on seventy-five acres along the south side of the Funny River Road, between Soldotna and Funny River. Our plan is to complete the remaining sixty-five acres of thinning, piling and burning before the summer of 2001.

Another highlight of the year for me was training/qualifying twenty new firefighters here at the refuge. Basic firefighter training consists of three modules: basic fire behavior, basic firefighting tactics and firefighter safety (Standards for Survival). Trainee firefighters must successfully complete this forty-hour basic training and a work capacity test before they are allowed to work on a wildland fire or prescribed burn. The work capacity or Pack Test requires a trainee to walk three miles carrying a forty-five pound pack in less than forty-five minutes.

Refuge firefighters successfully completed several wildland firefighting assignments here in Alaska and down in California last year. These off-refuge assignments are important both to the firefighter and to the national wildland firefighting effort. Every wildland and prescribed fire experience strengthens a firefighter’s knowledge of fire behavior in different fuel types and terrain, under different weather conditions. These experiences also build strength in the national

firefighting organization, by preparing a cadre of firefighters that can respond to many types of incidents throughout the country.

The refuge got some tough news in December when the Fire Management Officer, Larry Adams, resigned. Larry takes over thirty years of training and firefighting experience with him as he goes, and he will be hard to replace. We wish him well in his new pursuits (sailing around the world?), but we are hoping to use his talents on special fire projects in the future.

Well, I guess that's enough reflecting and pondering for now, I've got to get back to my beloved paperwork!

Doug Newbould is the Assistant Fire Management Officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. If you would like to learn more about fire management or other programs on the refuge, stop by the refuge headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call us at 262-7021, or check out our website <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.