

## “Why firewise?”—1996 Crooked Creek Fire

by Doug Newbould

Five years ago, something happened here on the Central Peninsula that should strike fear into the heart of every property owner who has a home or business in the wildland-urban interface. Late on the night of June 6, 1996, a wildfire was reported about fifteen miles east-northeast of Ninilchik. At 10:00 p.m. the fire had burned about five acres in a logging area. The weather was warm and dry with an air temperature of 70°F and a relative humidity of 27% (very warm and very dry!). Winds were out of the south-southeast at 4-14 miles per hour.

Within fifteen minutes of the fire report, the Alaska Division of Forestry sent a helicopter with five firefighters to initial-attack the fire. When the helitack crew arrived at the scene, they found the fire had doubled in size and was “running and spotting.” In other words, the fire was moving rapidly to the north and wind-carried burning embers were igniting spotfires out ahead of the flaming front. Additional firefighting resources including two engines, a medium helicopter with a bucket, a third helicopter for aerial reconnaissance, and five firefighters were soon on their way to the incident. Other resources were not readily available because of the lateness of the hour and the large number of resources already committed to the Miller’s Reach Fire at Big Lake.

When the additional help arrived that night to assist the helitack crew, the fire had expanded considerably and fire behavior was so intense that direct attack methods (such as attacking the edges of the fire directly) were not possible. The fire continued burning actively throughout the night and into the next day. On June 7<sup>th</sup>, in one burning period, it became the largest wildfire the Peninsula had seen since the Swanson River Fire in 1969. By the end of that day the fire perimeter encompassed 17,510 acres (that’s over 27 square miles of forest). The fire behavior was most extreme on that first full day of burning. By the time an incident command team arrived and began to build a firefighting organization, the show was mostly over; most of the damage was already done.

Before the fire was officially contained on June 13<sup>th</sup>, over 400 fire personnel had been assigned including four hotshot crews and thirteen hand crews. Five engines, seven dozers, two excavators and five heli-

copters also saw duty on the Crooked Creek Fire. Total suppression costs were over two million dollars.

Three factors kept the Crooked Creek Fire from becoming a major disaster:

- the head of the fire ran into Tustumena Lake, stopping the forward spread
- the weather changed for the better, diminishing the fire’s extreme behavior and allowing firefighters an opportunity to gain the upper hand
- there were no homes in the fire’s path on June 7<sup>th</sup>. (Only one recreational cabin was lost.)

The frightening thing about Crooked Creek is that it could happen again...and it probably will. If the same weather conditions existed say in May, June or July, and a fire started near Ninilchik for example, literally hundreds of homes could be lost. And who can say how many lives could be lost as well. A fire could start in Clam Gulch one evening, and twenty-four hours later it could be burning up your house in Kasilof.

So the question is, “What can I do about it? How can I protect myself and my family?” The best answer is, “Be FireWise.” Take the responsibility to make your home and personal property safe from the ravages of a wildfire. Create a defensible and survivable space around your home. As Crooked Creek and Miller’s Reach showed us all five years ago—you can’t simply rely on the suppression resources of Alaska to save your bacon. As much as any dedicated and professional firefighter in this great state would like to save every person and home from a wildfire, someday there is going to be another fire that we can’t stop. Do yourself and us a favor. Be a survivor instead of a statistic. Call me, your state forester, or your local fire department for more information about FireWise. We will do our best to help.

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