

Refuge plans prescribed fire projects at Mystery Creek and Funny River

by Doug Newbould



Fire management staff with glowing embers from a burn.

Every spring the fire management staff at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge prepares to implement certain prescribed fire projects. This year our plans include continuing work at Mystery Creek and along Funny River Road, plus two new projects.

The Mystery Creek project area is located about five miles north of the Sterling Highway and ten miles east-southeast of Swan Lake, between the Mystery Creek Road and the Enstar natural gas pipeline right-of-way. There are five contiguous burn units in the 5000-acre project area, much of which was burned by wildfire in 1947. The existing forest fuel type is best described as a black spruce-lichen woodland, with scattered stands of white spruce, bluejoint grass meadows and muskeg wetlands.

Two years ago, we successfully burned one unit and part of a second for about 500 acres or 10 percent of the project area. Last year the extreme fire season in the Lower 48 precluded the completion of planned fire projects at Mystery Creek and elsewhere on the Refuge, as we joined the national effort to fight those fires. Hopefully, this year will be different.

Our fire management objectives at Mystery Creek are hazard fuel reduction, habitat enhancement, research, and training. The prescription is to burn the units when fuel moistures are relatively low, so as to remove black spruce and expose mineral soil for

the propagation of hardwood (deciduous) shrubs and trees. This will produce the double benefit of reducing hazardous fuels and improving browse production for moose and hares. Like most prescribed fires, this burn will provide us opportunities to train firefighters in the use of fire tools and equipment and to observe fire behavior in different Alaskan fuel types.

Ongoing research at Mystery Creek includes wildlife studies, fire effects monitoring, and a special study conducted by the Pacific Northwest Research Station (US Forest Service) relating duff consumption and particulate emissions.

For the past three years, travelers on the Funny River Road have noticed changes to the forest along the south side of the road where we have been thinning the trees. The goal here is to reduce the wild-fire hazard in the “wildland-urban interface,” by a defendable fire break and escape route for residents from Funny River to Soldotna. We are doing this by removing hazardous fuel concentrations of black spruce and beetle-killed white spruce.

We have allowed the plastic-covered slash piles along Funny River Road to cure over the winter and planning to burn them this fall. We will complete the cutting phase of the project this summer, and all pile burning should be completed by the fall of 2002, resulting in a 6.5-mile fuel break.

New fire management projects for this year include an interagency cooperative research prescribed burn on state lands 5 miles southeast of Ninilchik and a cooperative wildland-urban interface project with Funny River Emergency Services. Of course, the completion of any or all of the projects I have mentioned depends upon the kind of fire season we have here on the Kenai Peninsula, in Alaska and nationally, and upon the weather. Fortunately, I don’t have to predict the severity of the fire season or the weather, I just have to prepare for the challenges both might present.

Doug Newbould is the Fire Management Officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.