

What are all those plastic-covered piles along Funny River Road?

by Doug Newbould

Even though we live in the so-called Information Age, and you can send or receive just about any information you want—around the globe, just by depressing a few keys on a computer keyboard—I am amazed at how poorly we humans communicate sometimes. The Funny River Road fuel reduction project is a case in point.

The fire management staff at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge began work on the Funny River Road fuelbreak in the spring of 1998. The goals of the project are threefold: 1) to reduce hazardous fuel loadings (beetle-killed white spruce and black spruce) in the wildland-urban interface, between the wildlands of the refuge and private lands along the Kenai River; 2) to improve the effectiveness of Funny River Road as a public access/egress route in the event of a wildfire; and, 3) to maintain the visual quality values of the forest in the treated area.

To accomplish these goals, we first cut the dead and beetle-infested trees. We next thin the live healthy spruce to roughly a 20-by-20-foot spacing. Finally, we prune or limb-up the remaining live spruce. Hardwood (deciduous) trees and shrubs are left uncut to provide a seed source for natural regeneration and to maintain the forested appearance of the project area.

We pile useable firewood for removal by area residents (free of charge—no permit required). All of the slash is piled and covered with plastic for later burning. (We do not burn the plastic; we pull the covers off the piles prior to burning and re-use covers on other piles.)

The project area is a 150- to 200-foot strip of forest along the south (refuge) side of Funny River Road, from Mile 3.0 to Mile 9.6. The cutting phase of the project is nearly complete, after this summer's work, so all that remains is to burn the piles.

We have burned piles every year since the project began, except last year, when our firefighters went south to fight fires in the western United States. Later this month, weather-permitting, we plan to continue burning slash piles between Mile 3 and Mile 4. Those piles are cured and ready to burn.

The piles created this summer (Mile 5 to Mile 6) will cure over the winter and be burned next spring or fall, depending on weather and fuel conditions.

The refuge has had a lot of help with the fuelbreak these past three years. The Kenai fire crew has assisted us on numerous occasions, including about one mile of clearing this summer. They did a great job, too. The Alaska Military Youth Academy brought a crew of young men down from Anchorage last year to help us for a few days. Also, refuge YCC (Youth Conservation Corps) crews and SCA (Student Conservation Association) volunteers have been a big help to us.

In fact, the Funny River project has provided an excellent training ground for many young people and firefighters alike, as we use the cutting/piling/burning activities to practice chain saw, hand tool and fire safety. We have also used the project as an example of the FireWise Community Action Program.

You might think that with all this activity along Funny River Road these past few years—after several news releases, radio interviews and newspaper articles, and after talking with dozens of people about the project on the phone and in person—you might think that folks in the Soldotna area would know what we're doing by now. But that is simply not the case.

We frequently get calls or visitors asking us what the plastic-coated humps along Funny River Road are for all the time. I can understand the summer visitors not knowing, but I'm truly surprised when residents are still in the dark about the project. Usually, the word-of-mouth communications fill in the blank spaces left by my so-called media campaign.

I guess that communicating effectively, even in this day and age, requires a lot more person-to-person explaining. I'm OK with that, if that is what it takes. Perhaps we need a talking "Smokey the Bear" out along Funny River Road. Or at least a few signs.

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/>.