

When it comes to wildland fire management, Alaskans do things differently

by Doug Newbould

I moved to Alaska from Colorado in 1991, and it wasn't long before I realized—Alaskans do things differently than folks in other parts of the country. But if there is a conscious effort by Alaskans to be different, I'm not aware of it. Perhaps it's the Last Frontier, the Greatland, exerting her profound influence upon our collective subconscious. Perhaps Alaska makes its inhabitants feel privileged and proud, as if we are somehow uniquely qualified to live here. I know when I travel to other parts of the country, I feel somewhat superior—even though I know I have no right to feel that way. If Americans are perceived as arrogant, then I wonder how foreigners view Alaskans? How's that for a humbling thought?

In my twenty-five years as a wildland firefighter, I learned that suppression strategies and tactics vary for different fuel types and topography, for different weather conditions and fire behavior, and for the different challenges presented by urban and wild landscapes. As a fire management officer, I have experienced some of the regional and agency differences in fire management practices around the country.

In Alaska, wildland fire management is unique—in many ways. The first, and most obvious difference is scale. Alaska is so huge, and yet the firefighting community is relatively small. In the Lower 48, aviation resources are plentiful and play an important role in fire suppression, especially in the West. In Alaska, fire aviation resources are limited, but critical to our success. In the Lower 48, you can drive to most wildland fires, so engines play a major role. In Alaska, there are so few roads that engines play a limited role.

Due to the expanse of Alaska, the lack of infrastructure and limited firefighting resources, wildland fire management has evolved—out of necessity—into a cooperative interagency community effort. Perhaps the most widely known product of this interagency cooperation is the Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan (AIWFMP). The AIWFMP consoli-

dated 13 “Area Specific” Plans and a 1984 amendment into one Alaska interagency plan, which has been in use since 1999. The Alaska Plan is viewed by many in the national wildland fire community as a model for interagency fire management.

On the Kenai Peninsula the Alaska Division of Forestry, the Chugach National Forest, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and the Kenai Peninsula Borough with all of its municipal and rural fire departments, work together under the umbrella of the AIWFMP and cooperative agreements to implement a successful wildland fire management program. Nowhere is this kind of cooperation and coordinated effort more important than on the Kenai—where a history of wildfire, a growing population and a complex of hazardous forest fuel types coexist.

Despite our cooperation on the Kenai and throughout Alaska, there is much room for improvement. Firefighting resources are often over-extended during periods of high fire danger, and interagency communications are at times—difficult. But we are constantly striving to improve our coordination and our response to the changing environment. And because we are, in many ways, isolated from the national fire organization, we have to do things differently to be effective. So maybe, being different as Alaskans isn't subconscious, maybe it's a necessity.

In my next article, I want to describe how Alaska and the Kenai Peninsula have been divided into fire management option areas: Critical, Full, Modified and Limited, as defined by the AIWFMP. These fire management options are reviewed annually by local fire management officers and land managers, and changed when necessary—in response to the changing environment. Until next time.

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