

When it comes to fire management, several options are available

by Doug Newbould

In my last Refuge Notebook article I wrote about the Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan (AIWFMP) and how it provides a fire management framework to federal, state and Native landowners that is unique to Alaska. I also promised to describe the four fire management (suppression) options as defined in the AIWFMP, and how those options are applied to the landscape here on the Kenai Peninsula.

When the fire forefathers and foremothers got together to write the AIWFMP, their goal was “to provide an opportunity through cooperative planning for land manager-owner(s) to accomplish individual fire-related land-use objectives in the most cost-effective manner.” In the goal, “cooperative planning” refers to an annual requirement for fire managers to work with land manager-owners and review the fire protection needs on lands under their (mutual) jurisdiction.

This annual cooperative review is the opportunity for the land manager-owners to change the fire management option for a given area of land to best meet the land management objectives for that area.

When it comes to suppression, there are four wildland fire management options.

The critical management option is designed to give the highest priority to suppression actions on wildland fires that threaten human life, inhabited property, designated developments and structural resources (such as National Historic Landmarks). Communities, businesses and individual residences are protected under this option. Operationally, the critical option provides the strongest continuous suppression response from local, regional and national fire suppression agencies.

The full management option is for the protection of cultural and historical sites, uninhabited private property, high-value natural resources and other valuable areas that do not involve the protection of human life. The full option also can be applied to lands as a buffer of protection for critical option lands.

Some examples of areas protected under the full option include the Hidden Lake Campground, the Swanson River Oilfield and any historical cemetery site.

Operationally, full option areas receive the same initial attack response as critical areas, but if after the first operational period a fire escapes control efforts, a wildland fire situation analysis is completed and an appropriate management response is selected for the incident. This allows fire managers to focus fire-fighting resources where needed most.

Conversely, the limited option recognizes areas of land where the cost of suppression may exceed the value of the resources to be protected, where the exclusion of fire may be detrimental to a fire-dependent ecosystem or community or where the environmental impacts of fire suppression activities may be more detrimental than the effects of the fire. Designated wilderness areas on the Kenai Peninsula are generally managed under this option.

Suppression activities in limited option areas range from periodic surveillance or monitoring to containment.

In designated wilderness areas, suppression activities are restricted except where life safety is threatened. Fire-fighters use the least amount of force necessary to achieve fire management objectives in wilderness areas.

The modified option is a hybrid between limited and full. The modified option provides a high level (full) of protection to an area and its values when the fire danger is high and the probability of successful suppression is low. A lower level of protection (limited) is provided in an area when fire danger is decreased and the threat to resource values is low.

In areas managed under the modified option, the fire danger is evaluated throughout the fire season. When seasonal weather conditions or a lack of fire activity indicate a reduced threat, the protection level can be converted from full to limited.

Some of you might be thinking that this system of options is too simple or that it puts too many limitations on a fire or incident manager’s response. And you would be correct, if not for a built-in flexibility mechanism called the decision criteria record.

This tool allows the land and fire managers to co-

operatively develop and document a decision to use a suppression response that is different than the selected fire management option.

The land and fire managers then prepare a wildland fire situation analysis to document the circumstances which require a different-than-planned response, to identify the incident management objectives and to analyze incident management alternatives.

These tools provide the flexibility that makes the AIWFMP such a useful and successful fire management plan in a state as large and diverse as Alaska.

A new fire management option wildland fire use,

has been added to the fire manager's toolbox through changes to national fire management policy over the past decade.

The Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group is currently working to incorporate this new fire management option in the AIWFMP.

In a future article, I hope to tell you more about this new option and how it could be used on the refuge.

Doug Newbould has been the Fire Management Officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1999. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.