

# The Glacier Creek Fire is still generating a lot of questions

by Doug Newbould

Although the smoke has finally cleared out and structures along the north shore of Tustumena Lake are no longer threatened, I am still getting lots of questions and comments about the Glacier Creek Fire. So, I thought it would be good for me to update you on the fire's status and answer some of those questions.

During the past two weeks, a series of wetting rains, cooler temperatures and nightly humidity recovery have combined—to greatly reduce fire behavior along the perimeter and remove the heat engine from the interior of the Glacier Creek Fire. And although the fire is not yet “out”, the dragon is sleeping and should soon succumb to winter's sword.

With clear air over the fire, Refuge pilot Rick Ernst has been able to see the true extent of the fire perimeter and collect enough GPS data to allow for more accurate mapping. Our resident biometrician and GIS specialist—Mark Laker, has recalculated the size of the fire at just under 6000 acres. While much of the perimeter is cold, there remain a few “hotspots”—one in Indian Creek canyon, another along the northernmost finger and a third along the lakeshore, just east of Moose Creek. At these points on the perimeter, the fire continues to smolder and creep in deep duff, occasionally climbing up and torching dead spruce.

The Bear Creek and Moose Creek trails have been re-opened, but the Emma Lake Trail remains closed until Refuge crews can assess the damage, remove hazard trees and complete trail rehabilitation work. There is a very real possibility the Emma Lake Trail will remain closed until next summer.

No structures—private or public—were lost to the fire, thanks to the valiant efforts of Refuge and State firefighters, landowners and three fire crews: Nikolai, Kaltag and the Prineville Hotshots.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation. Evidence gathered to date indicates the fire was probably human-caused, but the person or persons responsible have not been located. And contrary to some of the rumors making the rounds, the Glacier Creek Fire was not a prescribed fire nor was it intentionally set by Kenai National Wildlife Refuge or Alaska Department of Fish & Game employees.

One of the most frequently-asked questions is,

“Why wasn't the fire put out when it was first discovered and relatively small?” The answer is somewhat complicated, but I will do my best. When I was first notified there was a fire at the east end of Tustumena Lake (8/14), I was busy fighting the Willow Ave Fire #597 in a Kasilof subdivision off the Crooked Creek Road. All available wildland firefighting resources in the vicinity, including aircraft and engines from the Alaska Division of Forestry, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and Central Emergency Services responded because of the fire's threat to life and property.

Our unified interagency attack on the Willow Ave Fire was not a seat-of-the-pants effort, but a pre-planned cooperative response as prescribed by the Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan (AIWFMP). The same can be said of our response to the Glacier Creek Fire and every other wildfire that occurred in Alaska during this record fire season. The current version of the AIWFMP was established in 1998, but its usefulness and effectiveness has been tested every year. Perhaps after the 2004 fire season, we can say this unique interagency fire management plan is tried and true.

I wrote an article describing the AIWFMP in some detail, back in April of this year. You can read that Refuge Notebook column if you go to our website (see: below). Or if you would like to see the plan in its entirety, go to the Alaska Fire Service website: <http://fire.ak.blm.gov> and click on “Fire Planning.” The important thing to note is the AIWFMP gives all Alaska wildland fire managers a decision matrix tool that allows us to prioritize wildfires by their potential threats to life, property and other values at risk.

The plan classifies every burnable acre in Alaska according to its values at risk, the options for management of a wildfire on a given parcel of land and the operational considerations and procedures required for each management option. The Willow Ave Fire occurred in an area classified under the Critical management option due to the values at risk: life and private property. Critical fires receive the highest priority for suppression actions in Alaska. Conversely, the Glacier Creek Fire started in a Limited fire management option

area, classified as such because of its remote wilderness values. Limited fires generally receive the lowest priority for suppression actions.

However, every wildland fire in Alaska is analyzed individually, regardless of the land classification—to determine the values at risk, the land management objectives for the area, the fire’s potential to threaten values based on current and predicted fire behavior and weather, the availability of firefighting resources, the threat to safety of firefighters and the costs/benefits of managing the fire and different alternatives.

When the Glacier Creek Fire was first discovered, I consulted with the Refuge Managers and with the fire management officer from our cooperating fire suppression agency (the Alaska Division of Forestry). Together, we developed a plan to manage the fire, using a tool called a Wildland Fire Situation Analysis (WFSA). This written plan, signed by the land manager and the suppression agency, is reviewed daily and revised as necessary to address an ever-changing fire situation.

The Glacier Creek WFSA was revised twice during its duration. Ultimately, the decision was to allow the fire to burn within the Wilderness, while protecting private and public cabins in the area.

These kinds of decisions are never easy. The easy decision is to suppress every wildfire. It is much more difficult to let the dragon loose on the landscape. Because there is always some risk with wildfire, as much as we analyze each situation and plan for contingencies, there is always some risk that things will go wrong. But, because we do allow many fires to play their natural role in the ecosystem in Alaska, we are far better off than many states in the Lower 48. There are over 6 million acres of Alaska that won’t likely burn again for at least 50 years because of the way we managed wildfires this year.

*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/>.*