

Abandoned campfires continue to plague the Kenai Peninsula

by Doug Newbould

Devoted Refuge Notebook readers might remember an article I wrote back in July of 2000, 'Most Wildfires on the Refuge Caused by Campfires.' At the time, I was very impressed and somewhat dismayed by the fact—that abandoned and escaped campfires were by far and away the most common cause of Refuge wildfires, and were responsible for most of the large fires in Kenai NWR history.

The most notable of those wildfires were the 1947 Skilak Fire (310,000 acres), two fires in 1969—Russian River (2,570 acres) and Swanson River (79,000 acres), the 1974 Chickaloon Fire (3,780 acres), the 1991 Pothole Lake Fire (7,900 acres) and the 1994 Windy Point Fire (2,800 acres). While the cause of the 2004 Glacier Creek Fire (6,900 acres) was officially—unknown, circumstantial evidence indicated a human cause and a campfire was the most likely culprit.

Now, eight years after that article, I am compelled to raise the subject again and report that while some aspects of the fire regime seem to be changing, some are not—including the all-too-common occurrence of abandoned campfires. A few years ago, after a typically busy Memorial Day weekend, Refuge employees and firefighters discovered and extinguished more than 30 abandoned campfires. So far this fire season Refuge employees and fire staff have located and put out at least 19 abandoned and unattended campfires, one of which escaped its fire ring and was burning in the duff, making it a reportable wildfire.

And according to the Kenai-Kodiak Area Office of the Alaska Division of Forestry, Chugach National Forest and State Forestry firefighters have extinguished an additional 15 campfires on the Peninsula this season. Four of those campfires escaped their confines to become reportable wildfires.

While suppression/management of the large human-caused wildfires typically cost the state and federal government land management agencies (and taxpayers) millions of dollars every year, the costs of prevention, law enforcement, engine patrols, aerial reconnaissance or detection and suppression activities

related to unattended/abandoned/escaped campfires are also significant.

Besides the effort and costs associated with managing these unwanted fires, the most frustrating part of the problem to me is that these fires are, or should be—preventable. And while I'm sure the national media campaigns (Smokey the Bear and others) and our local prevention and education efforts make a difference, the seemingly high numbers of abandoned campfires here on the Peninsula indicate at least some degree of failure on our parts. Either we're just not reaching everybody with the prevention message or we're not deterring those who intentionally leave burning campfires behind, or both.

So the question I'm asking myself, my fellow fire managers and you is, 'how can we reach that portion of the million or so annual Peninsula visitors and residents who through accident, ignorance or spite, leave their campfires burning in developed campgrounds or in the remote reaches of the wilderness?' I am at a loss how to improve our current practices, other than to suggest more law enforcement (ticketing/fining violators).

However, being a positive person and not wanting to 'ruin' folks' recreational experiences with tickets and fines, my preference is to develop better prevention and education materials and outreach. But, I'm not sure what that program will look like so I'm asking for your input. If any of you have a high school student who is looking for an idea for their next Caring for the Kenai contest proposal—here you go. If any of you who read this article have a good idea we can develop into a successful outreach campaign, there is at least a Refuge t-shirt in it for you (at my expense).

If you have a bright idea to prevent abandoned campfires on the Refuge, please email me at doug_newbould@fws.gov or call me at (907) 260-5994.

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