



Alaska Wildland Fire Response and COVID-19

May 8, 2020 – Alaska wildland fire agencies are working together and with our national partners on addressing how to provide for public safety and protection of values while reducing the risk of COVID-19 exposure to firefighters and the communities we work in. Alaska fire managers are coordinating plans for the impacts COVID-19 will have on the response to and management of wildfires in Alaska. Because public and firefighter safety is the number one priority, we are following protocols from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) regarding ways to prevent or slow the spread of COVID-19 in our workforce including proper hygiene, teleworking, social distancing, and limiting non-essential travel.

We are working to identify best practices to keep our firefighters safe while protecting our communities from wildfires. This includes ways to disinfect engines and helicopters, providing COVID-19 personal protection equipment (PPE) kits for firefighters, conducting briefings via radio or virtual means rather than in person, and other steps to mitigate the risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19.

While COVID-19 circumstances are rapidly evolving, and federal, state and local guidelines continue to adapt with the situation, here are some answers to frequently asked questions as we continue to strategize our wildfire response in these challenging and uncertain times.

Click on link to skip to FAQ addressing: [Potential impacts](#); [wildfire response](#); in likelihood of [outbreak among employees](#); [smoke concerns](#); steps to [prevent the transmittal](#) of the disease to the public; [firefighting training adjustments](#); firefighting [resources](#); [preventative measures](#); [burn permit suspensions](#) on state, private and municipal lands; and [what the public can do to help](#).

What kind of potential impacts do we anticipate to wildland firefighter resources in Alaska this year?

Alaskan and national wildland fire response agencies are expecting a reduction in wildland firefighter availability and delays in mobilization this summer due to travel restrictions and quarantine requirements. Historically, Alaska has relied heavily upon assistance from Lower 48 personnel to help contain wildfires during busy seasons. Last year, for example, Alaska imported more than 5,000 personnel from the Lower 48 to help combat wildfires that burned approximately 2.6 million acres in Alaska. That was an unusual year because the 2019 fire season was considerably more subdued in the Lower 48 and resource availability was high.

How will we respond to wildfires?

Our mission critical work, such as protecting our communities from wildfires and other public service responsibilities, will continue with appropriate risk management strategies following current CDC, state and local health and safety guidelines. The goal is to ensure that all personnel are cared for in the safest possible manner and subject to prevention, containment, management, and treatment as needed while still

maintaining functional wildland fire response operations. The [Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan](#) outlines an interagency approach for prioritizing response to Alaska wildfires. This plan has been in use statewide since 1998 and has been proven effective over a broad range of conditions. Flexibility built into the plan allows for responses tailored to accommodate limited resource availability and unforeseen risks and conditions on the fireground such as those posed by COVID-19. All responses to wildfires in Alaska will consider the risks associated with COVID-19 and, in some cases, non-standard strategies will be employed in order to mitigate those risks.

What will happen if a COVID-19 outbreak occurs among firefighters?

National wildland firefighting agencies are updating plans and responses for various disease outbreak scenarios using the “Pandemic Response and Preparedness Plan for the Federal Wildland Fire Agencies” and “Infectious Diseases Guidelines for Wildland Fire Incident Management Teams.” These plans institute appropriate mitigation activities during wildland fire response actions to ensure response capability and will be used to address Alaska-specific concerns and challenges.

Are we considering how the smoke from fires will contribute to weakened respiratory health at a time in which the coronavirus is a serious risk by itself?

Potential smoke impacts to the public are always considered in all prescribed fire and wildfire management. As always, we will work in coordination with local and state health organizations and make any necessary changes should the need arise. One method uses experienced smoke management personnel, called air resource advisors, to assess where wildfire smoke may go and impacts of smoke on firefighters and communities. For more information on wildfire smoke, go to the Alaska [Division of Air Quality website](#) or the [Alaska Interagency Coordination Center smoke outlook page](#).

What are some of the measures taken to mitigate the risk of firefighting personnel transmitting COVID-19 to communities while responding to wildfires?

Alaska wildland firefighters already practice many of the preventative methods identified in CDC guidelines when responding to fires, especially in remote Alaska. Some of the methods include quickly mobilizing aerial firefighting resources during initial attack, briefings conducted to people in the field over handheld radios, and maintaining smaller fire camps away from communities. However, on larger incidents where more resources are mobilized, fire managers will attempt to avoid establishing large, congested fire camps and Incident Command Posts, known as ICPs, and limit close interaction with other incident personnel. We may also close operating bases to the public and all non-essential personnel and conduct screening for personnel entering a base to check for symptoms and overall health. We may manage wildfires in a more virtual world and strive toward minimizing our footprint and the number of people within a camp and a community.

For example, public information officers may limit their presence in affected communities where we would traditionally utilize information boards and public meetings. We may have more of a virtual presence when getting timely, accurate information to the public. Some of the tools we may utilize:

1. Online platforms such as: Social media; [Akfireinfo.com](#) blog; and the [InciWeb – Incident Information System](#)
2. AM/FM radio broadcasts
3. Virtual public meetings

4. Direct telephone and email communications with communities
5. Alaska Interagency Fire Information Office phone line at (907)356-5511
6. [Alaska Interagency Coordination Center](#) website
7. [Alaska Wildland Fire Information Map](#) with locations of fires

Communities are encouraged to reach out to the Alaska Information Fire Information Office at (907)356-5511 and information officers assigned to incidents to help identify best methods for dissemination of wildland fire information to the public.

How are agencies handling wildland firefighter training while limiting COVID-19 spread potential?

We are taking unique measures to ensure all wildland firefighters are trained, qualified and prepared for fire season. This includes, where possible, implementing new training processes using a combination of online training, waiving annual classroom and group training exercises to limit spread potential, and ensure social distancing. For example, BLM AFS Smokejumpers spread out the required annual refresher training jumps over a longer timeframe to allow for smaller groups conducting these jumps. All returning state and federal firefighters in Alaska, including emergency firefighters (EFF) and [federal casual hires](#), had their Red Card qualifications automatically extended through the 2020 fire season to prevent firefighter exposure to COVID-19 during refreshers.

Will there be enough firefighting resources for fire season this year?

It's impossible to [predict how busy Alaska's fire season](#) will be. Concerns about the spread of the coronavirus and associated travel and quarantine restrictions could delay, limit or even prevent Lower 48 resources from traveling to Alaska to assist with wildland fire suppression. This could potentially create severe staffing shortages for Alaska's wildland fire agencies in the event of a busy fire season. The Alaska Division of Forestry (DOF) and BLM Alaska Fire Service (BLM AFS) are evaluating the process of hiring EFF and casual hires for both firefighting and support positions for the upcoming fire season given the concerns about COVID-19 being spread in Alaska.

The BLM AFS awarded contracts for three [Type 2 wildland firefighting hand crews](#) for the 2020 season for faster response in rural Alaska. Other individuals interested in employment opportunities in support of firefighting efforts can find more information on [DOF](#) and [BLM AFS](#) websites and by registering at your local job center. All federal casual hires are required to pass FEMA online courses [IS-100.c: Introduction to the Incident Command System](#) and [IS-700.B: Introduction to the National Incident Management System](#) to be eligible for hire.

What proactive steps are wildland fire agencies and land management agencies taking to decrease the likelihood of wildfires threatening Alaska communities?

We are collectively taking steps to mitigate some of the potential for large, uncontrolled wildfires this summer, especially given the uncertainty that we'll have enough firefighting resources due to the potential of a COVID-19 outbreak. Some of these methods are:

- The Division of Forestry implemented a suspension on [small- and large-scale burn permits effective May 1 on state](#), private and municipal lands north of Cordova in an effort to reduce the number of human-caused wildfires.

- This includes the use of burn barrels, the burning of debris piles, maintained lawns and any other outdoor burning activity authorized under the DOF burn permits.
 - This does not apply to campfires or warming fires less than 3-feet in diameter.
 - This does not apply to areas in Southeast Alaska as the region's weather, predominately rain forest climate and fire history put it at less risk of wildland fire than the boreal forests elsewhere in Alaska.
 - Any persons or businesses found to be in violation of this burn permit suspension order may be issued a citation to pay a fine or appear in court.
- We continue to look for ways to reduce the wildfire risk around communities, including [Community Wildfire Protection Plans \(CWPP\)](#) and fuels mitigation projects. Fuel reduction programs are proven means of preventing catastrophic fires while reducing the wildfire risk to the public, firefighters and property. They also help forested lands naturally recover by reducing the need for more aggressive fire suppression techniques if there is a wildfire. The CWPPs are a collaborative effort between wildfire suppression agencies, federal, state and local governments, community groups, and individuals to develop a risk assessment and mitigation plan for communities. These include:
 - Prescribed burning is [planned on](#) federal military training lands in Alaska. Prescribed burns are fires that are intentionally set under controlled conditions to remove dry and dead grass and lower the risk of wildfires that could impact nearby communities. Removing the hazardous vegetation in the spring under more moderate conditions allows for the greatest degree of control and the lowest risk for negative impacts, such as smoke.
 - The BLM AFS is engaged in CWPPs with four Interior Alaska communities.
 - The US Fish and Wildlife Service is assisting in the update of nine CWPP's adjacent to their refuges.
 - The BLM Eastern Interior Field Office is seeking comments on [preliminary assessments](#) to reduce the risk of wildfires on BLM-managed land in central and eastern Alaska.

Why is the Alaska Division of Forestry implementing a suspension for small- and large-scale burning on state, private and municipal lands starting May 1?

- From 1999-2018, 62% of the total number of fires (9,042) were human caused, while 38% were primarily from lightning-caused natural ignitions.
- Burn barrels, brush piles, illegally burning human garbage and campfires are the leading causes of wildland fires in Alaska.
- Most of human-caused fires occur in population centers and areas with critical infrastructure like gas lines, electrical lines and major road corridors.
- Fires in populated areas risk exposing firefighters unnecessarily to COVID-19. If one responder gets sick, it can infect an entire engine or hand crew, or even close down an entire fire base.
- Wildfires require firefighting resources to be brought in from around Alaska, increasing a chance of COVID-19 spread or infecting smaller communities where a local health care system is limited or non-existent.
- Alaska relies heavily on firefighting assistance from the Lower 48 and Canada, which may not be available this year due to COVID-19.
- Alaska is one of several states nationally who have suspended burning based on similar circumstances.

See the [Alaska DOF burn permit page](#) for more information.

What are some of the ways the public can help by preventing human-caused wildfires?

The public plays an important role in preventing wildfires. Preventable wildfires threaten lives, property, and resources every year. Here are some ways you can help us keep our firefighters and communities safe by preventing wildfires:

- Be aware of local public safety area closures. Take extra precaution before venturing out and be careful with anything that could start a fire.
- Maintain your mechanical equipment. Many human-caused wildfires occur near roadways, communities and recreational areas, posing considerable public safety threats.
- Vehicle exhaust systems and hot mechanical equipment such as chainsaws and lawn mowers spark wildfires each year when they contact dry vegetation. If possible, avoid driving on dry grass when fire danger is high and never park a vehicle on dry grass. If you are towing a vehicle, make sure it is roadworthy with good tires, greased bearings and no chains dragging.
- Do not leave campfires unattended. While camping, before you leave the area or go to bed at night, make sure the campfire is “dead out” by dousing it with water, stirring, feeling for heat with the back of your hand, then repeating these steps to ensure it is out.
- [FireWise](#) your home by removing flammable material from the area surrounding your home, including cleaning out your gutters, to help ensure your property survives a wildfire. Your community can also take steps to protect it from a wildfire and be compatible with the area’s ecosystem. Find out more by going to the [DOF FireWise community website](#).

Firefighters are needed more than ever to keep Alaska safe, so please, do your part to prevent human-caused fires.