

**Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Division of Wildlife Conservation**

**Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration
Annual Performance Report
1 July 1997- 30 June 1998**

Fire and Forest Management Planning for Wildlife Habitat

Mary V Hicks, Editor



D. Haggstrom

Crushing Old Willows along Goldstream Creek

**Grant W-27-1
Study 20.0
March 1999**

STATE OF ALASKA
Tony Knowles, Governor

DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
Frank Rue, Commissioner

DIVISION OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION
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Mary Hicks
Publications Specialist
ADF&G, Wildlife Conservation
P.O. Box 25526
Juneau, AK 99802
(907) 465-4190

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PERFORMANCE REPORT

STATE: Alaska

Statewide/Region III

GRANT NO.: W-27-1

STUDY NO.: 20.0

PROJECT TITLE: Fire and Forest Management Planning for Wildlife Habitat

AUTHOR: Dale Haggstrom

PERIOD: 1 July 1997–30 June 1998

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

1. Work with state and federal agencies and the private sector to plan and coordinate wildland fire and forest management efforts to maintain or improve habitat for wildlife.
2. Encourage limited suppression efforts in remote areas to permit wildland fire to resume its natural role of perpetuating diverse, productive ecosystems.
3. Encourage prescribed burning and other appropriate forestry practices in developed areas to offset the negative ecological effects of increased suppression of natural fires.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS DURING THE PROJECT SEGMENT PERIOD

Statewide

I represented the commissioner on the Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group (AWFCG) and am chairman of the AWFCG for calendar year 1998.

AWFCG was formed in May 1995 by combining the functions of two former groups: the Alaska Interagency Fire Management Council and the Multi-Agency Coordinating (MAC) Group. Primary membership includes the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (ADNR), Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Forest Service (FS), National Park Service (NPS), Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC), Chitina Village Traditional Council and Chugachmiut Corporation. Chugachmiut also represents the Association of Village Council Presidents and the Bristol Bay Native Corporation. The AWFCG coordinates fire planning, seasonal conversion of Modified Management Option areas to Limited Management Option areas, open burning restrictions, suppression priorities during periods of suppression resource shortages, emergency departures from planned responses, fire weather data collection, fire management data archiving and use, prescribed fire training, fire prevention and education, nonsuppression fire management issues, and research needs. The AWFCG also manages the Alaska Type I Incident Command Team.

AWFCG nearly completed an amendment of the Alaska Wildland Fire Management Plan. The amended plan will consolidate the 13 original fire management plans and incorporate operational changes that occurred since the inception of the statewide planning effort in 1980.

The National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) directed local geographic coordinating groups to assume a greater role in management of Type I Interagency Hotshot Crews. The AWFCG, as the geographic coordinating group for Alaska, asked the NWCG to clarify these new responsibilities due to controversy over management and funding of hotshot crews.

We encouraged other agencies to implement fuel hazard reduction programs. Prescribed burning and mechanical treatment of fire-prone vegetation to protect communities from wildland fires will benefit hunters and other recreationists by enhancing wildlife habitat conditions and improving access. At the national level, a Joint Fire Science Program was created to fund research to provide a scientific basis for implementing fuel hazard reduction efforts. Eight million dollars was allocated for FY98. AWFCG is represented on the Stakeholder Advisory Group for this program and will try to direct research attention to Alaska's needs.

AWFCG developed position specifications for a facilitator-coordinator of fire prevention and education efforts in the state. BLM, ADNR, NPS, USFS, and FWS will provide approximately \$94,000 annually for 3 years to fund the position. Proposals for implementing it were requested, and responses were received from Matanuska-Susitna Borough and Chugachmiut Native Corporation. A three-year contract was awarded to the borough. Continued ADF&G involvement in fire prevention and education issues is needed to ensure that fire education includes messages about the ecological benefits of fire in addition to traditional prevention messages and, secondly, that fuel hazard reduction efforts to protect communities or subdivisions are advocated along with more traditional "be safe with fire" education messages and "defensible space" programs for individual homes.

AWFCG sponsored "Media Day" events in Anchorage and Fairbanks on 29 April 1998 and 6 May 1998, respectively. These were the first planned annual events to inform media staff about what they can expect to see and experience while reporting on fires during the fire season. I participated in the Fairbanks event. The presentations included information on the beneficial effects of fire in Alaska's fire-prone ecosystems.

AWFCG held its first biannual Statewide Protection and Education Workshop in Anchorage on 22 April 1998. The purpose of the workshop was to gather ideas from field personnel around the state, share existing material, and develop potential projects.

One of the research needs identified by the AWFCG Fire Research Development and Applications Committee received funding during this reporting period. A study proposed by Dr. Tom McCabe of the U.S. Geologic Survey-Biological Resource Division (USGS-BRD) received approximately \$586,000 from the Forest Service and Departments of Interior and Agriculture. The funding was for a 5-year project to assess wildland fire impacts on winter habitat use and distribution of caribou within Alaska's interior boreal forest ecosystem. The study, proposed for the range of the Fortymile Caribou Herd, also received \$765,000 from the USGS-BRD.

GIS experts from agencies represented on the AWFCG developed recommendations for technical standards for Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data entry. Standards will make it easier to share digitized data between agencies and reduce duplication of effort. Several agencies have been digitizing boundaries of the fire management options used in the Alaska Wildland Fire Management Plan independently of each other. When adopted, the technical standards should reduce data transfer problems as use of GIS technology increases and it is applied at a finer scale. Agencies have already begun to enter fire management data from 1:63,360 scale maps instead of the 1:250,000 scale maps used in the past. Becky Strauch, Division of Wildlife Conservation (DWC), Anchorage, is representing ADF&G on GIS-related issues before the AWFCG.

I prepared a draft Prescribed Fire Protocol to support categorical exclusion of our prescribed fire program from the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. Under USFWS guidelines, prescribed burning is categorically excluded when state plans and procedures adequately address the environmental issues in the NEPA process. We are working with ADNR, Division of Forestry (DOF) to ensure this documentation accurately reflects state policies and procedures. DOF provides authorization, permitting, risk assessment and risk management responsibility for these burns and implements them for DWC.

I attended the Division of Forestry's fall fire review on 29–30 September 1997 and the Interagency Fall Fire Review on 13–14 November 1997 and presented ADF&G concerns about the 1997 fire season. I also made a presentation to the Alaska Type I Incident Command Team on 24 April 1998.

I attended a workshop entitled "Fire and Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest: Research, Policy and Management" at the 1998 Annual Northwest Section Meeting of The Wildlife Society. The workshop and conference were held on 6–10 April in Spokane, Washington.

Region III

We worked with the fire managers from DOF and the BLM-Alaska Fire Service (AFS) and with land managers to evaluate wildland fires during the fire season and encourage suppression decisions that benefited wildlife. I provided regional assistance for ADF&G area biologists in an ongoing effort to improve communication and cooperation between suppression staff and area staff, resolving problems or concerns.

In late summer 1997, we had concerns about suppression actions taken on fires in the McGrath and Fairbanks areas. We also responded to a complaint about smoke from a wildland fire in the Harding Lake area that was erroneously attributed to a prescribed fire we planned for the Tanana Flats. In early summer 1998, there were relatively few fires due to the wetter than normal weather. However, suppression efforts on the 53,000 acre Carla Lake Fire near Delta were extensive because homes were threatened. We made 2 flights to the fire as part of staff effort to reduce the impact of suppression activities on important fish and wildlife resources.

I worked with ADF&G area staff and other agencies to facilitate fire-related projects. I worked with Tok DWC and DOF staff to plan the East Fork Prescribed Fire in the Fortymile River drainage. The culmination of this effort was a patchwork burn of approximately 52,000 acres,

following 1 day of aerial ignition on 21 July 1998. I worked with McGrath DWC and DOF staff to advance long-standing plans for a prescribed fire in the Farewell area to maintain bison range. We also worked with the University of Alaska and BLM to help them involve and inform the public as they prepare for the 2,200 acre Frostfire research burn near Fairbanks.

We encouraged land managers to reassess their selections of fire management options. Fire management options (Critical, Full, Modified, and Limited) under the Alaska Wildland Fire Management Plan should be chosen to balance human-related protection needs with the ecological needs to maintain wildland fire in fire-dependent ecosystems. We found areas where the selected management option required a higher level of suppression effort than necessary to protect values at risk. This reduced opportunity to maintain wildlife habitats, diverted suppression resources from higher priority needs, and reduced availability of fire management resources for prescribed fires.

We initiated a request to review wildland fire management options in large portions of the Chena and Salcha river drainages after losing several opportunities for needed burning during summer 1997. Following an overwinter review by Division of Lands (DOL), Division of Parks, DOF, DWC, and BLM-AFS, vast portions of the Salcha River drainage were reclassified from Modified to Limited Management. Reclassification of lands in the Chena River drainage was postponed until winter 1998–1999 to allow more time for public notice and comment. At that time we will review the Full Management Option area adjacent to the Salcha River for possible size reduction.

We also worked with BLM, DOL, Doyon Ltd., and NPS to review the wildland fire management options in the Minchumina/Telida area. After working with local village corporations to address their needs, Doyon Ltd. agreed to place much of the Doyon land in the Limited Management Option. This allowed state and federal land managers to reduce fire protection levels on adjacent public lands.

We worked with the Golden Valley Electrical Association, BLM, and ADNR to encourage location of the planned new electrical intertie from Healy to Fairbanks to minimize effects on fire and habitat management efforts on the Tanana Flats. We opposed proposals that would cross the undeveloped central portions of the Tanana Flats and presented arguments for consolidating new developments such as the intertie near the Parks Highway, current power transmission line, and Alaska Railroad. Thus far, the planning process for the intertie seems to favor a route that first parallels the Parks Highway and then the Tanana River. This route, if selected, will adequately address our fire-related concerns, although we prefer construction in the existing highway corridor because that route would have the least impact on wildlife resources.

The Fairbanks Assistant Area Biologist participated in the Cache Creek Subcommittee of the Citizens Advisory Committee for the Tanana Valley State Forest (TVSF) during winter 1997–1998. We were unable to provide assistance with other aspects of the TVSF planning effort during this reporting period.

We helped Tok Area Forestry and Northern Region DOF staff design a timber sale along a portion of the Tok River drainage. We met with them during October 1997 to discuss options for

protecting or enhancing wildlife values and, subsequently, worked with them to prepare a Forest Land Use Plan for the timber sale.

The Tok River drainage is an important wintering area for moose. Tok DWC staff crushed willows on over 1,200 acres in the drainage during the 1980s to maintain quality browse for this locally important moose herd, and they prepared a prescribed fire plan for a 2,100 acre burn in nearby Natohona Creek. The Tok River timber sale, slated to span most of a decade, is designed to enhance moose habitat. Browse created by logging activities and willow crushing are expected to eliminate the need for the Natohona burn, freeing prescribed fire funds for use elsewhere in the area.

PROGRESS MEETING PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Our participation in the AWFCG is an effective way to influence land and fire management decisions and policies in favor of wildlife values and to develop constructive rapport with other agencies and organizations. We should continue our involvement on as many fronts as possible.

Generally, we received good cooperation from state, federal and private entities on wildland fire planning and related issues. The exception was the BLM-AFS, which steadfastly stalled efforts to consolidate the original 13 wildland fire management plans by conservatively interpreting provisions of the plans and attempting to force more NEPA documentation and public review than required for plan amendment. Lack of cooperation from BLM-AFS on this and other interagency issues has frustrated AWFCG efforts to implement new federal fire policy and to move toward more ecologically responsible fire management in the state.

We were frustrated by the overcautious approach of some managers to midseason conversion of Modified Management Option areas to Limited Management Option areas. When managers are too conservative, opportunities to safely allow burning near developed areas are frequently lost. When the natural burn regime is truncated, diversity and productivity of the affected wildlife habitat declines. The Modified Management Option will not serve its intended purpose if managers are unwilling to realistically assess the risks associated with conversion to the Limited Management Option.

Due to lack of staff time, we were not fully involved in the planning process to revise the Tanana Valley State Forest Management Plan. We will continue to participate at the planning team level when the team is reconvened later in the planning process. Meanwhile, staff participation will be minimal, unless program priorities change or we receive additional staffing.

Considerable progress was made on other fronts to encourage prescribed burning and other appropriate forestry practices in developed areas to offset negative ecological effects of increased suppression of natural fires. We worked closely with DOF on the Forest Land Use Plan for the negotiated timber sale in the Tok area and on the Cache Creek planning effort near Fairbanks. We continued a cooperative program with DOF and The Ruffed Grouse Society to intensively manage aspen stands for ruffed grouse habitat on several sites near Fairbanks and Delta. We also continued to develop a varied and cost-effective prescribed fire program in DWC Region III (see Project W-28-1, Study 20.0, Alaska Wildlife Habitat Enhancement). It includes broadcast burning

of logging slash, burning of standing aspen as an alternative to felling, and aerial ignition of forest stands on a landscape-scale. We continued to support and encourage other agencies' prescribed fire programs, especially those directed at managing forest fuels near communities.

Public recognition of the need to manage forest fuels near communities increased, and the concept enjoyed strong support among fire and land management professionals. However, funding constraints continued to thwart efforts to implement a Fuel Hazard Reduction Strategy. DOF was not able to obtain general funds to conduct prescribed fires primarily for reducing forest fuels, even though these costs are a *fraction* of those of emergency conditions when fire fighters are forced to fight wildland fires near communities. The disastrous fires at Tok in 1990, Big Lake in 1996, and Delta in 1998 clearly illustrate the alternative we face in many populated areas of the state if programs to manage forest fuels are not funded and implemented.

Fuel hazard reduction was a secondary objective for every prescribed fire the DWC funded for wildlife habitat enhancement. However, it is inappropriate for DWC funds to be the sole funding source for burns designed primarily to protect communities from wildland fires, even though wildlife and users of wildlife benefit from the habitat changes from fuel hazard reduction efforts. This initiative, with its associated benefits for wildlife, will not proceed on any significant scale until it becomes a public priority for state and federal general funds.

SEGMENT PERIOD PROJECT COSTS

Segment Period Project Costs

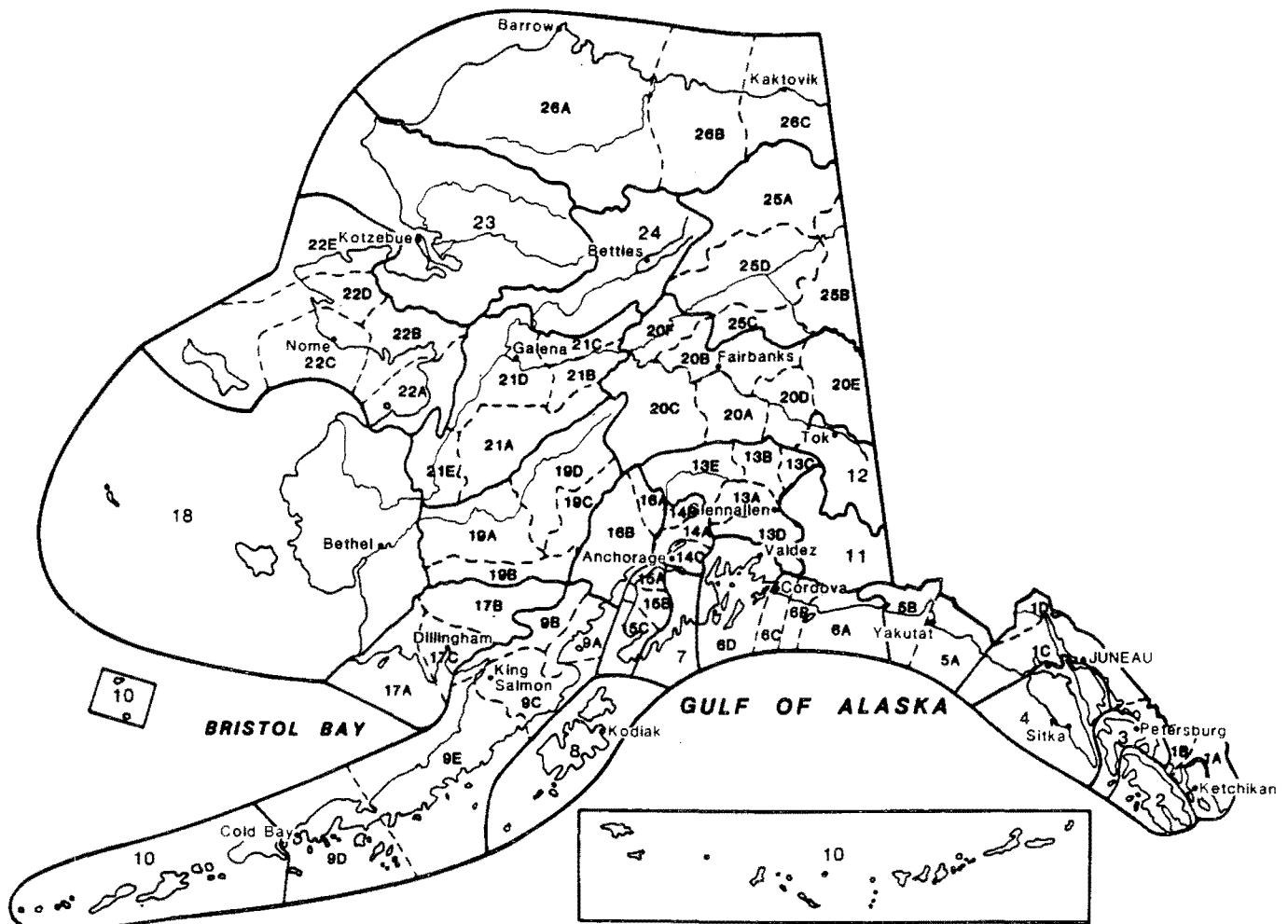
	<u>Personnel</u>	<u>Operating</u>	<u>Total</u>
Planned	51.8	2.0	53.8
Actual	22.2	2.3	24.5
Difference	29.6	-0.3	29.3

Explanation: Need for personnel funding was overestimated during project planning for this segment period. Overspending of operating funds occurred because I made an unplanned trip to Spokane, Washington, to attend the "Fire and Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest" workshop at the Northwest Section Meeting of The Wildlife Society.

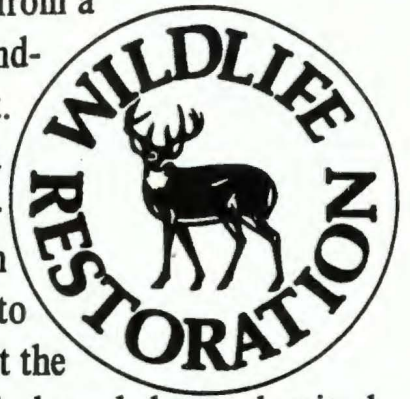
SUBMITTED BY:

Dale A. Haggstrom
Wildlife Biologist II

Alaska's Game Management Units



The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program consists of funds from a 10% to 11% manufacturer's excise tax collected from the sales of handguns, sporting rifles, shotguns, ammunition, and archery equipment. The Federal Aid program allots funds back to states through a formula based on each state's geographic area and number of paid hunting license holders. Alaska receives a maximum 5% of revenues collected each year. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game uses federal aid funds to help restore, conserve, and manage wild birds and mammals to benefit the public. These funds are also used to educate hunters to develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes for responsible hunting. Seventy-five percent of the funds for this report are from Federal Aid.



D. Haggstrom

Crushing Old Willows along Goldstream Creek