



## National Fire Plan

### **Wildland Fire Use on Alaska National Wildlife Refuges**

In summer 2003, employees at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Tetlin and Kenai national wildlife refuges discovered small lightning fires smoldering in remote areas on their refuges. Although the fires could have been quickly suppressed, managers decided to implement an alternative strategy: These fires were among the first in Alaska to be managed under national guidelines for wildland fire use.

Wildland fire use is a way to allow fire play its natural role in the environment. Under the national guidelines, fires are allowed to burn, but are closely monitored. Suppression actions are implemented only when it is necessary to protect people, their homes and communities. This kind of on-the-ground management is dynamic and changes as the fire progresses and triggers coordination with suppression agencies and adjacent landowners.

In addition to the ecological benefits of fire, costs are kept in check by limiting suppression actions only to those necessary to protect important values. In Alaska, where a small number of suppression resources must be allocated over large areas and numerous fires, wildland fire use provides a way to manage fires using limited resources. On the Tetlin and Kenai wildlife refuges, where suppression services are provided by State of Alaska cooperators, wildland fire use also allows the refuge staff to be more involved in fire management decisions and to capitalize on research, public outreach, and environmental education opportunities.

The 2003 fire on Tetlin refuge burned until the rains came in September, eventually encompassing 42,800 acres, entirely on federal land. A Rare Event Risk Assessment Program (RERAP) analysis was conducted in mid-August to predict the likelihood that the fire could have reached native allotments and cabins, even computer models during the fire showed that the risk was low. Although suppression plans were in place to protect private property, the RERAP analysis showed that the fire never posed a threat people, or structures, therefore no direct suppression action was ever required.

Researchers are using the burned area to conduct a fire consumption study. The data will be used to help predict smoke production, behavior and severity of future fires.

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