

BRIEFING PAPER

HB 93 Fuel Breaks (\$20 Mil)

Division of Forestry (DOF)



Date: March 26th, 2021

Contact: Norm McDonald, Chief of Fire & Aviation

Email: norman.mcdonald@alaska.gov

Wildland fire is a regular occurrence in the boreal forests of Alaska. About eighty percent of the population resides in communities at risk from wildland fire. The threat to these communities is increasing due to expanding suburban construction in or near forested areas, the spruce beetle outbreaks that have caused over a million acres of spruce tree mortality in the Susitna and Kenai regions, and fire seasons that are starting earlier and ending later than historic norms. Fire activity has increased significantly over the past several decades with the top three years of area burned occurring since 2004. Additional measures are needed to help reduce the risks to residents, communities, infrastructure, and other values at risk, including regional and local economic impacts during long duration incidents. 2019 highlighted the benefits of utilizing fuel breaks on forested lands near the communities of Fairbanks, Willow, and Sterling. Existing fuels breaks provided a powerful tool in increasing public safety and decreasing fire suppression costs.

Prioritization:

Maintaining Current Fuel Breaks- An estimated 300 fuel mitigation projects have been implemented in the last 40 years, with many of these now requiring maintenance. Most of Alaska's fuel breaks are funded through competitive federal grants. As a stipulation of these grants, monies awarded cannot be used to maintain existing fuel breaks. Maintenance requirements vary depending on fuel types, but the most common treatment is to use a roller chopper, which mulches the fifteen to twenty-year-old regrown vegetation. In shaded fuel breaks, hand clearing by crews is utilized to remove dead and down trees.

Proposed Fuel Breaks- As identified by community protection plans and DOF fire staff, these communities have identified projects in need of funding: Delta Junction, Tok, Glennallen, Upper Tanana Valley, Fairbanks, Healy, Caswell, Meadow Lakes, Houston, Kenai, Homer, Sterling, and villages throughout western Alaska. Currently there are 30 proposed projects with projected costs approximately \$9.5 million.

Strategic Planning- Improvement and development of community wildfire protection plans provides a strategic tool for public safety. The protection plans allow for identification and prioritization of fuel breaks and allow for additional revenue streams through federal grants. Forestry Stewardship programs utilize these plans for fuel removal on private land, creating more job opportunities in the process. Improving the process and access of an interactive online fuels database and mapping will allow for ease of identifying current and future fuels projects. This will bolster awareness of existing fuel breaks for fire suppression use.

Benefits- The strategic use of fuel breaks during wildland fires has occurred several times over the past decade and in 2019 alone resulted in the protection of structures and land valued at \$627.9 million. Investment in these projects will also create opportunities for contractors, extend the seasonal employment of our fire fighters, which will improve retention in the workforce, and create opportunities for woody biomass use in communities.

- Increases public safety and protects critical infrastructure.
- Reduces wildland fire suppression costs.
- Promotes Alaska job growth.