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Research Brief

TO: Representative Bob Lynn
FROM: Katie Spielberger, Legislative Analyst
DATE: October 16, 2014
RE: Firefighting in Alaska
LRS Report 15.061

You asked for a brief history of firefighting in Alaska, including any dates that would be appropriate to use as a day of honor. You also asked for information about the current responsibilities and duties of professional and volunteer firefighters in the state.

Alaska is home to thousands of volunteer and professional firefighters serving in communities across the state, each with its own extensive history. Generally, fire departments formed and expanded in response to the needs of a growing population in the territory and state of Alaska. We describe below some of the early histories of individual fire departments, as well as territorial and state oversight, noting that a comprehensive history of firefighting in Alaska is far beyond the scope of this report. Today, Alaska firefighters are trained to respond to a variety of emergencies in addition to fires, notably emergency medical service (EMS) and rescue calls, as detailed below. Finally, we discuss some of the ways in which communities in Alaska and beyond honor their volunteer and professional firefighters. On a national level, as well as in some other states, firefighters are honored in conjunction with Fire Prevention Week in October. Firefighters are also typically honored on September 11 in commemorations across the country, including in Alaska.

Firefighting in the Territory of Alaska: Early Departments

Fire departments were some of the first organizations established in new communities in the territory of Alaska, and the history of many city fire departments date to the time of city incorporation. Early fire departments were often simple volunteer efforts with little equipment beyond buckets and warning bells. The earliest histories we found of individual departments are from some of the first cities to be incorporated in Alaska, including Fairbanks, Juneau, Ketchikan, and Skagway.

A volunteer fire department was organized in Skagway in 1898, as the town boomed amid the Klondike Gold Rush, and was put to the test in 1899, when fire destroyed several downtown buildings and a forest fire destroyed an army post near Dyea.¹

The Douglas Volunteer Fire Department was organized in 1898, and the Juneau Volunteer Fire Department was organized in 1899. Capital City Fire and Rescue provides on their website a lively account of fire department activities on Gastineau Channel since 1887, reproduced from a document by an unknown author found in a fire hall.² The document describe the first known significant fires in Juneau, one at the Opera House Building in 1887, which was put out by Chilkat blankets, and one in 1898 that destroyed the courthouse and jail, resulting in the release of prisoners.

A few weeks before Ketchikan was incorporated in 1900, volunteers organized a bucket brigade, which was as simple as it sounds: members only needed to own a bucket and be able to carry it full of water to a fire. By 1903, the city recognized the need for more adequate fire protection and built and equipped a fire house, which was dedicated in 1904.³

¹ History compiled and edited by Jeff Brady, *Skagway News*, and accessed on Skagway Convention and Visitors Bureau website at <http://skagway.com/skagway-history/>.

² Capital City Fire and Rescue, www.ccf.net/docs/History_Prior_to_1947.pdf

³ "Ketchikan's Volunteer Legacy: Buckets to hydrants to hi-tech," by June Allen, *sitnews.net*, January 15, 2004, www.sitnews.net/JuneAllen/KFD/011504_ktn_fire_dept.html.

In 1906, a large fire destroyed more than 70 buildings in the heart of the Fairbanks commercial district. This fire prompted several changes in fire protection, including higher wages for firefighters and more fire hydrants.⁴ In 1923, when the University of Alaska Fairbanks opened, the campus established its own fire department, first as a bucket brigade, then using military surplus fire equipment. In the 1950s, the campus fire department began to protect the area surrounding the campus as well.⁵

Other early fire departments include the Seward Volunteer Fire Department, which was incorporated in 1906, and the Anchorage Fire Department, which was formed in 1915.^{6, 7} Anchorage added a second fire department the next year to protect railroad properties.⁸

One of the most disastrous fires in the territory was a 1934 fire that destroyed most of the city of Nome, including the entire business district and parts of surrounding residential districts.⁹

Fire Departments After Statehood

Following Statehood, fire departments expanded along with Alaska's population, closely following the incorporation of new cities and the needs of communities. Many volunteer departments gradually became more professionalized, acquired larger resources and staff, and often developed emergency medical services (EMS).

In the early years of Statehood, some new departments were as simple as the bucket brigades used at the turn of the century. For example, the Ester Volunteer Fire Department began in the mid-1960s as a "neighborhood fire extinguisher brigade" that relied on a "telephone tree" when a fire broke out. In 1977, the department incorporated and acquired a surplus fire tanker from the Trans-Alaska Pipeline.¹⁰

Departments continued to spring up out of necessity. For example, the tiny Bear Creek Fire Department, located about five miles north of Seward, relates this history:

In 1976 a roadside food market caught fire during the night at mile 5.8 of the Seward Highway. A call for help dispatched Seward Volunteer Fire Department with one truck and several volunteers from their station 5 miles away.

After arriving on scene, the engine quickly emptied its 500 gallons of water. The apparatus wasn't equipped to draft water and could only refill through a hydrant. Unfortunately, there were no hydrants within 4 miles and the market burned to the ground.

After this disastrous fire, friends and neighbors of the roadside market united to establish the Bear Creek Fire Service Area.¹¹

⁴ Fairbanks Firefighters, www.fairbanksfirefighters.org/?zone=/unionactive/view_article.cfm&HomeID=81474&page=FFD20History.

⁵ University of Alaska Fire Department, <http://uaf.edu/fire/about/>.

⁶ Seward Fire Department, <http://sewardfire.com/>.

⁷ Municipality of Anchorage Fire Department, www.muni.org/Departments/Fire/Pages/AboutAFD.aspx.

⁸ The Anchorage Fire Department provides an extensive history of the department at www.muni.org/Departments/works/admin/PublicArt/Documents/FTC%20Users%20and%20MOA%20Fire%20Dept%20History.pdf.

⁹ "History of Nome," Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum, 2011, accessed at www.visitnomealaska.com/PDF%27s/history-of-nome.pdf.

¹⁰ Ester Volunteer Fire Department, www.esterfire.org/aboutus.html.

¹¹ Bear Creek Fire Department, www2.borough.kenai.ak.us/BearCreekFire/history.html. The Bear Creek Fire Service Area received nearly \$4 million from the state in 2013 for the construction of a multi-purpose facility.

The Girdwood Fire Department was established in 1959. Girdwood residents organized to form Girdwood EMS in response to a 1974 incident in which an ambulance took over an hour and half to arrive from Anchorage to treat the victims of an attack.¹²

History of the Division of Fire and Life Safety

On March 23, 1955, an arson fire in a building next door to the Territorial Police offices in Anchorage “sparked” the creation of the Office of the Fire Marshal.¹³ On December 5, 1956, the first Territorial Fire Safety Code was adopted. Shortly after Statehood, on September 15, 1959, Robert F. Crouse was appointed as the first Alaska State Fire Marshal and served until 1967. He was named National Fire Marshal of the Year in 1965. That same year, the Legislature authorized a statewide fire training position within the Department of Vocational Education, to be overseen by William A. Hagevig from the Ketchikan Fire Department. An example of the success of fire training programs was provided in the September 1968 Fire Marshal’s Newsletter as follows:

Chief Boddy answered a call for help from the State Fire Marshal’s Office in 1966 in order to assist in training volunteer firefighters at the Pribilofs. Following [a] tragic fire earlier that year, in which eight children and one adult lost their lives, the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries requested training for the two existing volunteer companies at the Pribilofs. Besides Chief Boddy, Lieutenant William Hagevig of the Ketchikan Volunteer Fire Department and Assistant Fire Marshal Andre Schalk went on this expedition. As a result, to date, there are two very active and well trained departments in St. Paul and St. George. At least, during a large warehouse fire, shortly after the team of instructors left, part of the building and all of the cases of beer were saved.¹⁴

In 1967, the Division of Fire Prevention was organized in the Alaska Department of Public Safety, and in the mid-1970s, five regional fire training centers were constructed around the state, in Anchorage, Juneau, Fairbanks, Kotzebue, and Bethel. In 2003, the Division, now called the Division of Fire and Life Safety, was reorganized into its three current bureaus—Life Safety and Inspection, Plan Review, and Training and Education.

Current Firefighters, Duties and Responsibilities

Today, there are at least 1,000 professional firefighters in Alaska, and many more volunteer firefighters, working in numerous fire departments and agencies across the state. There are currently 145 fire departments registered with the Division of Fire and Life Safety.¹⁵

Fire departments responded to at least 60,000 incidents in 2013, based on reports to the Alaska National Fire Incident Reporting System (ANFIRS). Of these reported incidents, the vast majority (about 95 percent) were non-fire incidents, primarily emergency medical services (EMS) or rescue calls (64 percent). We include, as Attachment A, an excerpt from the 2013 “Fire in Alaska” report showing the types of calls fire departments responded to. The report estimates that a fire department responded to a call every nine minutes in Alaska.

According to the Alaska State Firefighters Association, volunteers comprise almost 90 percent of firefighters throughout Alaska, but the number of volunteers has declined by more than 20 percent over the past two decades. Volunteers are

¹² Girdwood Fire Department, www.girdwoodfire.com/about.

¹³ “A Brief History of the Division of Fire Prevention,” by retired Deputy Fire Marshal Walter Winston and Public Education Coordinator Jodie Hettrick. The document can be accessed at www.dps.state.ak.us/Fire/docs/history.pdf.

¹⁴ “A Brief History of the Division of Fire Prevention.”

¹⁵ The Department of Public Safety lists the registered departments as well as 106 fire departments that may be active but are not currently registered at <http://dps.alaska.gov/fire/fdregistration.aspx>.

typically required to complete basic fire and emergency medical services (EMS) training, and may be called to respond to a variety of situations, including fires, emergency medical incidents, natural disasters, hazardous materials incidents, water rescue emergencies, and other emergencies.¹⁶ Professional firefighters typically require more extensive training. Several universities in Alaska offer formal training programs, with associate degrees offered by the University of Alaska Anchorage, the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and Ilisagvik College in Barrow.

Fires and firefighting in Alaska extend into the wilderness. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, the fifth, sixth, and seventh largest single fires on record in the U.S. all occurred in Alaska – the Inowak fire in 1997 (610,000 acres), the Boundary fire in 2004 (537,098 acres), and the Minto Flats South fire in 2009 (517,078 acres).¹⁷ Wildfire fighters are coordinated through the federal Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) Alaska Fire Service; the U.S. Forest Service, and the State Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry Fire and Aviation Program.

In the 2013 “Fire in Alaska” report, State Fire Marshal Kelly Nicolello noted the following:

Normally I would highlight areas of concern, however, this year I want to highlight a few areas of success. From calendar year 2012 to 2013, civilian fire deaths are down 44%, civilian injuries are down 23% and firefighter injuries are down 33%. Considering that total fires during the same time period increased 6%, structure fires increased 2% and brush/wildland fires increased 24%. Essentially, you responded to more fire incidents with greater positive effect and kept yourselves safer in the process. Congratulations!¹⁸

National and State Memorials and Dates of Honor

National Fire Prevention Week is celebrated the week in October that includes October 9, the day the Great Chicago Fire in 1871 did most of its damage. The week has been celebrated nationally every year since 1925, making it the longest running public health and safety observance on record.

The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation honors all firefighters who died in the line of duty during the previous year on the second weekend of October.¹⁹ Many states also honor firefighters locally in conjunction with these national events.²⁰ Many European countries and Australia honor firefighters on International Firefighters Day, May 4, which is the feast day of St. Florian, the patron saint of firefighters.

Another date associated with honoring firefighters is September 11. Many Alaska communities honor their firefighters in connection with 9-11 remembrances. For example, in Anchorage, 9-11 ceremonies are held at the Fire Memorial, which was dedicated on September 11, 2011, to honor firefighters who died in the line of duty in Alaska.

The Alaska State Firefighters Association provides information about many of the individuals honored on the memorial at <http://alaskastatefirefighters.org/FireMemorial.aspx>. Events resulting in the death of multiple firefighters honored through the memorial include the following:

October 13, 1941 – five service men and one officer of the Fort Ray U.S. Army Firefighter detail died during an explosion in a dynamite and ammunition shed on the Fort Ray causeway on Japonski Island near Sitka. Many other service people and civilians were also injured.

¹⁶ Alaska State Firefighters Association, <http://alaskastatefirefighters.org/Volunteer/LearnMore.aspx>.

¹⁷ “Historically Significant Wildland Fires,” National Interagency Fire Center, accessed at www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo_stats_histSigFires.html.

¹⁸ Annual “Fire in Alaska” reports from 2004 to 2013 can be accessed through <http://dps.alaska.gov/fire/alaskafirestatistics.aspx>.

¹⁹ National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, www.firehero.org/events/memorial-weekend/.

²⁰ The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation maintains a list of fire memorials in other states at www.firehero.org/fallen-firefighters/state-firefighter-memorials/.

June 22, 1968 – a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) aerial fire tanker crashed into Joaquin Mountain en route to a fire, killing the pilot, co-pilot, helicopter mechanic, and a passenger.

July 3, 1970 – four BLM firefighters and an aircraft pilot (names unknown) were killed during a plane crash after take-off from McGrath, Alaska.²¹

We hope this is helpful. If you have questions or need additional information, please let us know.

²¹ Alaska State Firefighters Association, <http://alaskastatefirefighters.org/FireMemorial.aspx>.

Attachment A

Excerpt from *Fire in Alaska 2013*, Department of Public Safety, Division of Fire and Life Safety

Alaska 2013 Fire Picture at a Glance

Fire departments reporting to Alaska National Fire Incident Reporting System (ANFIRS) had 61,607 responses in 2013, with 1,603 of these responses reporting mutual aid assistance.

2013 State Incident Summary

Total Responses	61,607
<i>Less Mutual Aid Responses</i>	<i>-1,603</i>
Total Incidents	60,004



2013 State Fire Incident Breakdown:

Structure Fires	747
Confined and/or Contained Inside Structure Fires	489
Motor Vehicle Fires	487
Tree, Brush, or Grass Fires	542
Outside Rubbish or Trash Fires	398
Other Outside Fires	80
Other Fires	12
Exposures	68
Total Fires	2,823

2013 State Non-Fire Incident Breakdown:

Rescue/EMS	38,646
Explosion – No After Fire	43
Hazardous Conditions	1,449
Service Calls	3,761
Good Intent Calls	8,524
Other Calls	125
False Alarms	4,633
Total Non-Fires	57,181

Alaska's 2013 Time Clock. Every. . .

- 1 minute a fire caused \$89.78 damage
- 9 minutes a fire department responded to a call
- 13 minutes a fire department responded to a rescue call
- 1 hour a fire department responded to a good intent call
- 1 hour a fire department responded to a false call
- 3 hours a fire department responded to a fire call
- 2 hours a fire department responded to a service call
- 6 hours a fire department responded to a hazardous call
- 11 hours a fire department responded to a structure fire
- 17 hours a fire department responded to a vehicle fire
- 9 hours a fire department responded to a residential fire