

Fifty years of firefighting in Alaska: '...so tired you feel like a zombie'

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This summer marks 50 years of firefighting in Alaska. The Alaska Fire Control Service was formed in 1939 and consisted of fire guards patrolling the Alaska Railroad, 1,500 miles of highway and part of the Kuskokwim River. They were able to cover about 4 percent of the area needing protection.

A lot has changed in the past 50 years. Today, lightning strikes are detected through direction finders almost as soon as they hit the ground. A BLM Alaska Fire Service computer in Fairbanks processes the information and charts the latitude and longitude on a map. The fire manager enters the coordinates in the computer and notes the land ownership, terrain and vegetation of the area.

A planeload of smokejumpers is sent out to reconnoiter the area and if needed, put out the fires. Smokejumpers provide the first line of defense to firefighting in Alaska, but when a fire gets out of control, BLM calls up the village crews to help contain the fire.

For the "groundpounders," firefighting methods haven't changed much. They still use a spruce bough to beat out the flames and a pulaski to dig out hot spots. Village crews provide the backbone of Alaska's firefighting operations.

The hot, smokey air hits you like a brick wall as you step off the bus; hundreds of firefighters all wearing yellow shirts mill around you. Billowing smoke clouds fill the sky.

The slopes around the fire camp are so steep only a mountain goat would feel safe climbing them. Giant trees dwarf everything around you. These are just a few of the feelings of culture shock hitting a Native fire crew fighting fire in the Lower 48 for the first time.

Jeff Nelson from Aniak in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta helped fight fires in southwestern Oregon in 1987.

"We were amazed at how steep and mountainous the terrain was and all the different insects and snakes we saw."

"After a week and a half, many of the crew members were really homesick. Fighting fires 17 hours a day makes you so tired you feel like a zombie," Nelson said.

"Native crews are critical to our mission in Alaska and in recent years have also played a vital role in fighting fires on a national basis," says Tom Owen, manager of the BLM's Alaska Fire Service.

"Last summer the village crews battled fires that eventually burned more than 2 million acres in the state," he said.

The crews had been on the fire line for up to eight weeks in Alaska with very little rest when the fire season in the Western United States virtually exploded. Desperate calls for manpower were issued, and more than 1,500 people, including 62 crews and overhead personnel from Alaska, went south.

For the next month or more they worked up to 16 hours a day under the most adverse conditions. Not only is hiring village crews a vital resource for wildland fire agencies, it is a financial boon to the villages with crews.

"Trapping and firefighting are our two main sources of income in Aniak," says Nelson. During the last several seasons, most firefighters earned several thousand dollars each. In 1988 alone, nearly \$9.6 million went back to their local village economies.



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"In the 1950s the villages were often very isolated," says then fire crew boss Russ Hanson. "Several times I went into a village looking for men to hire, only to find they were all out fishing."

In 1954-55, Jim Scott of BLM's Homer office resolved that problem by hiring some of the first all-women fire crews.

"The crews we did hire back then were very well adapted to the environment," says Hanson. "They did lots of subsistence hunting and fishing and often walked long distances as part of their normal lifestyle."

"In 1956 we were fighting a raging tundra fire 75 miles from Selawik without much luck. Out of nowhere a man approached me saying he and a dozen other villagers from Selwaik had traveled by boat, about 45 miles, then walked another 30 miles across the tundra."

"They wanted to help fight the fire, they said, because they were concerned about the caribou calving

grounds that could be affected by the fire. They had carried enough food and clothing on their backs to sustain themselves for several days. I was impressed," says Hanson.

In those days, BLM paid Natives \$1.25 an hour, while their non-Native counterparts got \$2.78 an hour. The reason given by officials for this blatant discrimination was that this was to prevent villagers from starting fires just to get paid. This later changed in the late 1950s.

To form a fire crew today, a village must have enough physically fit people 18 years or older to make a 16-person crew, a phone where the crew can be reached, an airstrip large enough to handle a plane to move the crew out and reasonably good weather.

If all the above criteria can be met to the satisfaction of the Alaska Fire Service's requirements, the village must then select a crew boss who in turn selects the 15 crew members. Smaller villages often combine with other nearby villages to form a crew. Large villages such as Fort Yukon or Hooper Bay may have as many as three crews available.

Once the crew is established, the Alaska Fire Service training staff flies out to the village during the winter or early spring, gives the step test to each prospective crew member to ensure he or she is fit and teaches the basic firefighting training courses.

The training and test qualify the crew to fight fires anywhere in Alaska and the Lower 48.

The crew boss, who is responsible for the welfare and work of the crew, receives 80 hours of crew boss training. He or she recruits the crew, makes sure crew members are aware of conditions of hire such as no substance abuse and staying in camp, fulfills fire assignments, serves as timekeeper, takes commissary orders and disciplines crew members if needed.

Once trained, the crew is added to Alaska Fire Service's rotational crew roster and waits for the call. Crew members must bring their own work clothes and boots. Alaska Fire Service provides the fire tools, hard hats, nomix shirt, pants and a backpack.

When Native crews are sent south, each crew is accompanied by a crew representative from the Alaska Fire Service or the State of Alaska to help smooth the way.



In 1979, the Bureau of Land Management initiated Interagency Fire Management Planning.

Oftentimes crews from very small villages are suddenly thrust into a totally unfamiliar situation such as a fire camp of 2,000 people. The crew representative deals with the fire overhead, arranges the crew's travel and anything else needed to smooth the way.

Last summer Russ Hanson was crew coordinator for five Native crews sent to a large fire in eastern Washington.

"Some crew members saw horses and cows for the first time," says Hanson. "The incident commander in charge of the fire had some reservations about using Alaska crews, but after the first week he was very satisfied."

BLM's Alaska Fire Service Manager Owen says the performance of Alaska firefighters is improving each year.

"In 1988 there were instances of extreme fire conditions in the Lower 48 where Alaska fire crews were specifically requested because of their abilities," he said. "Their reputation is spreading among the national firefighting community."

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