

Whether to fight the fire sparks debate

Until the late '70s, all fires were attacked and put out as soon as they were discovered.

A tremendous amount of effort and money were expended on fighting all Alaska fires regardless of whether it might be more cost effective or even beneficial for a fire to be left to burn. The pervasive thinking was that all fire is bad as reinforced by Smokey the Bear.

However, studies showed that fire had been part of nature's cycle for thousands of years and can be very beneficial in providing new forage and shelter for wildlife.

In 1979, the Bureau of Land Management initiated Interagency Fire Management Planning. The state was divided into 14 planning areas.

Through an intensive fire planning effort, land managers were asked to categorize all their lands into one of four suppression categories:

•Critical — lands where human

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life or habitation are present.

•Full — areas with valuable resources such as commercial timber stands and historic structures.

•Modified — uninhabited areas with resources of lesser value.

•Limited — lands where natural fires are beneficial or where the costs of fighting fire are greater than the fire damage.

Land managers in each planning area indicated the level of fire protection they desired for their lands with special emphasis given to suppression costs versus values at risk, the history of fire problems in a specific area and the opportunity to complement desired land management objectives.

Two opposing views emerged from this planning effort. On the one hand there are those who feel that fire plays a critical role in maintaining Alaska's diverse pattern of wildlife habitats.

"The wealth of moose, small

game and furbearers in many parts of Alaska are products of wildfires," says Dave Kelleyhouse of Tok, biologist for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. "Years and years of successful fire suppression have caused terrific buildups in highly flammable fuels which would have burned little by little over time.

"Instead, the 'saved up' fuel creates a situation such as the 1988 Yellowstone fires."

On the other side of the argument are those who feel their health and lifestyles are threatened by wildfire. Some of the strongest arguments against Alaska's let-burn policies come from Native groups whose traplines have been burned.

Fort Yukon trappers claim to have suffered substantial losses during last summer's fire season. In response, proponents of the let-burn policy respond by saying that in the long run wildfire will substantially improve the trapping areas.

Put it out or let it burn? Not an easy question to answer.