

BLM UPGRADES FIREFIGHTING

Helitack Forest Fire Attack System Pays Off In Controlling Burns

By SUSAN TAYLOR
Staff Writer

There's probably only one place in the Interior where the words "wet and dandy" are used to describe the cloudy, rainy weather that has hovered over the Interior much of the summer.

That place is the emergency fire fighting center in Fairbanks

But the rain has not put them out of business, by any means.

As of the last of July, the Fairbanks district had reported a record number of fires—274 as compared with 232 in 1969

However, the number of acres burned showed a large decrease over last year. Instead of the approximately four million acres burned in 1969, fires had taken only about 113,000 acres by the last of July.

The reason? According to William Robertson, Fairbanks Fire Control Officer in charge of Support Operations, fires are being detected faster and reached earlier.

For early detection, the BLM is using jet aircraft to plot the centers of electrical storms, a major cause of fires; an infrared heat detector; and several look-out points.

To reach the fires earlier, the agency has improved and expanded its use of helitack crews, Robertson said.

These crews are comprised of men hired from the villages who are flown to the scene of a fire in a helicopter arriving in minutes after a fire is detected.

"Our philosophy in fighting fires this year," Robertson said, "has been to hit them hard and fast while they are small and to keep them small."

A special appropriation of \$500,000 was received, he continued, to expand the fire fighting program and to put both village firefighting crews and helicopters on the job and ready to go before the fire season started, rather than waiting until it started.

In all, 569 men from 16 villages were trained for the helitack operation. Most were natives, but, as Robertson explained, could have been native or white, all depending on who was available in the villages.

The villages were: Northway, Venetie, Selawick, Allakaket, Anaktuvuk Pass, Chalkysik, Kaltag, and Gamble.

Why did the BLM go to the villages for its crews and how

(Continued on Page 5.)

BLM Helitack System . .

(Continued from page 1)

did it decide which villages to use?

According to Robertson, the BLM invests a lot of money in training the crews and by hiring villagers is able to keep a lot of the experience in the State.

Many can be depended upon to return to firefighting year after year.

For some, the seasonal work provides their only source of employment and is a vital supplement to subsistence hunting and fishing. The regular village crew member is paid \$4.65 per hour, plus room and board, while on active duty.

Also, the village crews, Robertson continued, are enthusiastic and work well as a team.

In deciding which to choose, the village must be able to furnish a 25 man unit, must have easy access by road or aircraft and the village members must not have other employment for fighting fires that would make not have other employment that would make them unavailable for fighting fires.

After a village has agreed to furnish a crew—usually 25 men, then one of the 10 crew bosses is assigned to the crew as a liaison between the BLM and the firefighters.

He does not act as the crew's supervisor, who is chosen from and by the crew members.

Rather, he goes to the village, brings the crew members to Fairbanks for a three-day training session and stays with them during the training and while they are on active duty assisting them in any way possible.

These liaison bosses, Robertson, said have been hired to fill a communication gap that existed between the firefighting crews and the BLM.

"They are our telephone to finding out problems." They may or may not be native but are well informed on BLM regulations and are experienced firefighters.

The training course of 64 hours covers fire line construction, fire organization, safety, and the use and operation of radio equipment, power saws, pumps, hand tools, fire extinguishers and vehicles.

After training, each crew remains in Fairbanks on a stand-by basis for two or three weeks before returning to the village where it waits to be called.

While in Fairbanks, most of the crew members live in what is

known as Tent City at the BLM firefighting center off Airport Way.

The tents were set up, Robertson said, due to a lack of space in the center's present housing.

Helicopters and equipment are on the grounds so if an emergency arises, the call can be answered immediately.

The number of crews called into Fairbanks for training and then held on a stand-by basis depends on the wet and dry conditions in the Fairbanks district.

This territory covers 212 million acres of which about 85 million are considered burnable.

As the burning conditions worsen, more crews are called in.

In deciding which crew to call, the BLM activates the one or ones it can get to the scene the fastest, Robertson said. It might be a crew on standby in Fairbanks or one near the fire.

If all of the crews were put on the job and still more men were needed, the BLM would then go to the State Manpower Center. This summer, he added, applicants from the center have not been used for firefighting but have been employed only for support work such as janitorial services. In the past, the Manpower Center was used extensively.

In addition to the helitack crews, the BLM uses smoke jumpers and is beginning to use repellers who will fill the gap between the jumpers and the helitack crews.

Next year's plans call for all helitack crews to be trained as repellers for use in those places where even a helicopter cannot land.