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PRESS RELEASE

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Well-resourced response to Yankovich Road wildfire saved millions

(Fairbanks, AK) – An aggressive, coordinated response that saw crews and aircraft rapidly extinguish a wildland fire near Yankovich Road on July 16 prevented damage to an estimated 125 parcels of land and buildings valued at \$52.5 million, a state official said today.

The success of the effort demonstrates the value of having the necessary workforce, equipment and resources available for rapid response to wildfires, said Helge Eng, Alaska state forester and director of the Division of Forestry.

“If we hadn’t had qualified crews there with the experience and tools to quickly attack this fire, Fairbanks probably would have had a two-week disaster that would have cost millions to fight, and that would have caused many millions in damage to homes, business and land,” Eng said.

A private pilot first reported the fire burning in black spruce about 100 yards south of a residential area on Fairbanks’ west side at 2:31 p.m. on July 16. Within 15 minutes the Alaska Interagency Coordination Center had directed an air attack airplane and four water-scooping aircraft from nearby Fort Wainwright, plus two helicopters, to the site. Seven minutes later, the first of several fire engines from the division’s Fairbanks Area Forestry office arrived, followed shortly thereafter by the Area’s helicopter.

Within a half hour, eight smoke jumpers were ordered in, followed in the next half-hour by three additional crews. As aircraft drew water from nearby Smith Lake and from the Fairbanks International Airport floatplane lake, ground crews laid hose lines and cut fire lines, then searched for and extinguished hot spots. Crews remained working on the site until the fire was declared fully extinguished on July 20.

Eng said Chris Moore, a fire behavior analyst at the Alaska Interagency Coordination center, used a computer model to simulate the likely impact had the fire not been contained so quickly. Moore’s calculations showed there was an 80-100 percent chance

the fire would have spread over 14 days to impact 125 parcels of land worth \$37 million, with buildings and improvements worth \$15.5 million.

As it was, preliminary estimates indicate the response cost approximately \$80,000 showing how a modest investment at the right time can save big costs later, Eng said. By way of comparison, the Haystack Fire north of Fairbanks a few weeks earlier required a full Type 2 management team, and cost about \$4 million to fight over two and a half weeks.

He credited several factors for success, including the proximity of resources at Fort Wainwright and the Fairbanks airport, the nearness of water supplies, and the availability of smokejumpers, ground crews, fire engines and aircraft.

“Alaskans enjoy living in and around some of the world’s most beautiful forests, but that proximity carries risk, especially during our wildland fire season,” Eng said. “Having the necessary wildland firefighting resources organized and available before an emergency occurs represents a critically important investment in keeping Alaska communities safe.”

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