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Department of  
Natural Resources

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STATE OF ALASKA

PRESS RELEASE

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## **SE Alaska exempted from May 1 statewide burn permit suspension**

**(Fairbanks, AK)** – The Alaska Division of Forestry will exempt Southeast Alaska from a planned May 1 statewide burn permit suspension, as the region’s weather, fuel types and fire history put it at less risk of wildland fire than mainland Alaska.

“Most of Southeast Alaska is composed of coastal rainforest where wildfires have a very difficult time starting and spreading, unlike the black spruce and boreal forests to the north,” said Chris Maisch, director of the Division of Forestry. “What few wildfires that do occur in Southeast are small and more easily managed by local fire departments.”

Permitted burning will be allowed in Southeast Alaska on state, municipal and private lands, including the City of Cordova and extending south, while burn permits in all other parts of the state will be suspended beginning May 1, Maisch said.

The burn permit suspension applies to both small- and large-scale burn permits for the use of burn barrels and burning of brush piles. The suspension applies to permits issued by the division, as well as those issued by boroughs or municipalities.

Human activity has caused more than 60 percent of wildfires in Alaska in the last 20 years, most of them ignited by burn barrels and debris burning in the spring when dead grass and unpredictable winds increase fire danger. Similar concerns have prompted many states to initiate similar burn restrictions.

“We know this is an inconvenience to many Alaskans, but we still think it’s the right thing to do to start the season,” said State Forestry Fire Program Manager Norm McDonald. “We have to reduce human-caused fires. We will not have the people or resources we need if we have a bad season like we did last year.”

**(MORE)**

Burn suspension

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The division is suspending permitted burning not only to reduce the number of human-caused fires in Alaska, which will reduce both the risk of wildfires to the public, but also to reduce the risk of potential COVID-19 exposure to first responders and those they encounter.

Most human-caused fires occur in population centers with critical infrastructure such as major road corridors and gas and electrical lines. Fires in these areas risk exposing firefighters unnecessarily to COVID-19. One infected responder could infect an entire crew, or even force an entire fire operations base to close, with dramatic impacts on wildfire responses. Moving firefighters around the state and bringing personnel in from the Lower 48 also increases the chances of COVID-19 spreading into communities.

Alaska has historically relied heavily on help from Lower 48 personnel to help contain wildfires, and last year imported more than 5,000 personnel to help combat wildfires that burned approximately 2.6 million acres. Alaska and national wildland fire response agencies expect COVID-19 could bring travel restrictions and quarantine requirements that could reduce firefighter availability by 30 percent this year, McDonald said.

“The reality is that we don’t know if we’re going to be able to bring resources up from the Lower 48,” he said. “We can’t count on it, so we have to take other steps and draw up contingency plans to protect our firefighting capabilities. We’re doing what we can to protect our crews and reduce the likely demands on them wherever possible.”

The burn permit suspension will not prohibit cooking, warming or signaling fires less than three feet in diameter with flame lengths no more than two feet high. It also will not bar the use of commercially manufactured outdoor cooking and heating devices with built-in open flame safety devices.

The division will regularly monitor weather, fire conditions and resource availability, and may allow permitted burning in particular areas or regions if conditions allow, McDonald said.

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BURN PERMIT  
SUSPENSION  
MAY 1ST, 2020



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