

State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources



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June 1, 2016

Alaska wildland fires from 2015 still pose risks this year

(Fairbanks, AK) – A year after the second-largest fire season on record in Alaska, the 2015 fire season is still smoking.

The Alaska Division of Forestry has detected 16 “holdover” fires so far this season, including one on Saturday that ignited the 8,130-acre Medfra Fire now burning in a remote part of Southwest Alaska.

Holdover fires are just what the term implies, fires that were thought to be extinguished but come back to life the following season when conditions dry out and temperatures warm up. While not uncommon in fire-prone Alaska, the number of holdover fires this summer is much higher than normal.

State Forestry has found 12 holdover fires in the Kenai/Kodiak Area, three in Southwest Alaska and one in the Mat-Su Valley. All but one of those reported on the Kenai Peninsula were found within the perimeter of the Card Street Fire that burned almost 8,900 acres last year near Soldotna. The remaining holdover fire was from the 2014 Funny River Fire, which burned almost 200,000 acres.

Firefighters in the Mat-Su Valley on Sunday discovered a holdover fire from last year’s 7,500-acre Sockeye Fire in Willow.

The three holdover fires in Southwest Alaska are progeny of the Soda Creek Fire, which burned approximately 16,500 acres last summer.

Holdover fires are common in Alaska because the duff layer that blankets the forest floor – including moss, twigs, leaves and spruce needles, etc. – is so thick, said Alaska Division of Forestry fire behavior analyst Robert Ziel.

“In the high boreal forest in Alaska there is so much fuel and it’s so deep, once fire gets established it’s hard to put out,” Ziel said. “They get buried below where they can get moisture, the duff above them absorbs the moisture and once the ground freezes they become impervious.”

More than 5.1 million acres burned in Alaska last summer, making it the second-largest fire season on record. The volume of fire last summer combined with a lack of snow cover last winter as well as a warm, dry spring is likely contributing to the high number of holdover fires, Ziel said.

“There are probably holdover fires every year and the question is whether we get the conditions that expose them,” Ziel said.

Several of the holdover fires found on the Card Street Fire have been located right along the edge of the fire perimeter, Howie Kent, Fire Management Officer for the Division of Forestry’s Kenai/Kodiak Area, said. Those are the hot spots that worry Kent and other fire managers.

“The Card Street Fire didn’t burn cleanly; there’s a lot of mosaic, a lot of unburned fuel out there,” Kent said. “There’s still potential for a 5- to 10-acre fire to make a run to the edge of the perimeter and get out into the green. That’s what we’re trying to prevent.”

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