

## Airports Support Firefighting on the Last Frontier

By Natalie Lyon, AASP Newsletter Editor, RESPEC

Alaska's vast and remote landscape bisected by few roads means that aviation is an essential part of life on the Last Frontier. From delivering consumer goods, groceries, and essentials to cities and rural communities, to aviation for recreation and subsistence, to medivac and search and rescue operations, and of course, everyday travel; aviation plays a key role in all Alaskans' lives. This role extends to keeping the people and property of the state safe from wildfires. Wildland firefighting is truly a collaborative effort in Alaska, with responsibilities coordinated among the Bureau of Land Management Alaska Fire Service (BLM AFS), State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources Division of Forestry and Fire Protection (DOF), and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). Each of these agencies depend on Alaska's airports to access fire locations and provide fire protection and suppression services to communities statewide. Thankfully, the Alaska Aviation System is nearly as vast as the state itself, with over 700 registered airports and airfields geographically dispersed across Alaska's 665,400 square miles. From Utqiagvik in the north, to Adak in the west, Hyder Seaplane Base

in the east, and Metlakatla Seaplane Base farthest south; the airport system provides access to every corner, including Alaska's most rural and remote communities. These key access points offer first responders entry to firefighting locations on the ground, staging areas for firefighting gear and supplies,



View of the East Fork Fire burning about 5 miles from the village of St. Mary's from a BLM AFS airplane monitoring the scene on June 10, 2022.



BLM AFS Firefighters stage equipment at Lake Minchumina seaplane Base on August 10th, 2022.

and even facilities for temporary, seasonal, and permanent fire bases. The map on page 2 shows the expanse of the state's public use airports, compared with 2022 and historical fires in the state.

### Wildland Fire Protecting Agencies

The BLM AFS, DOF, and the USFS divide the state into three protection

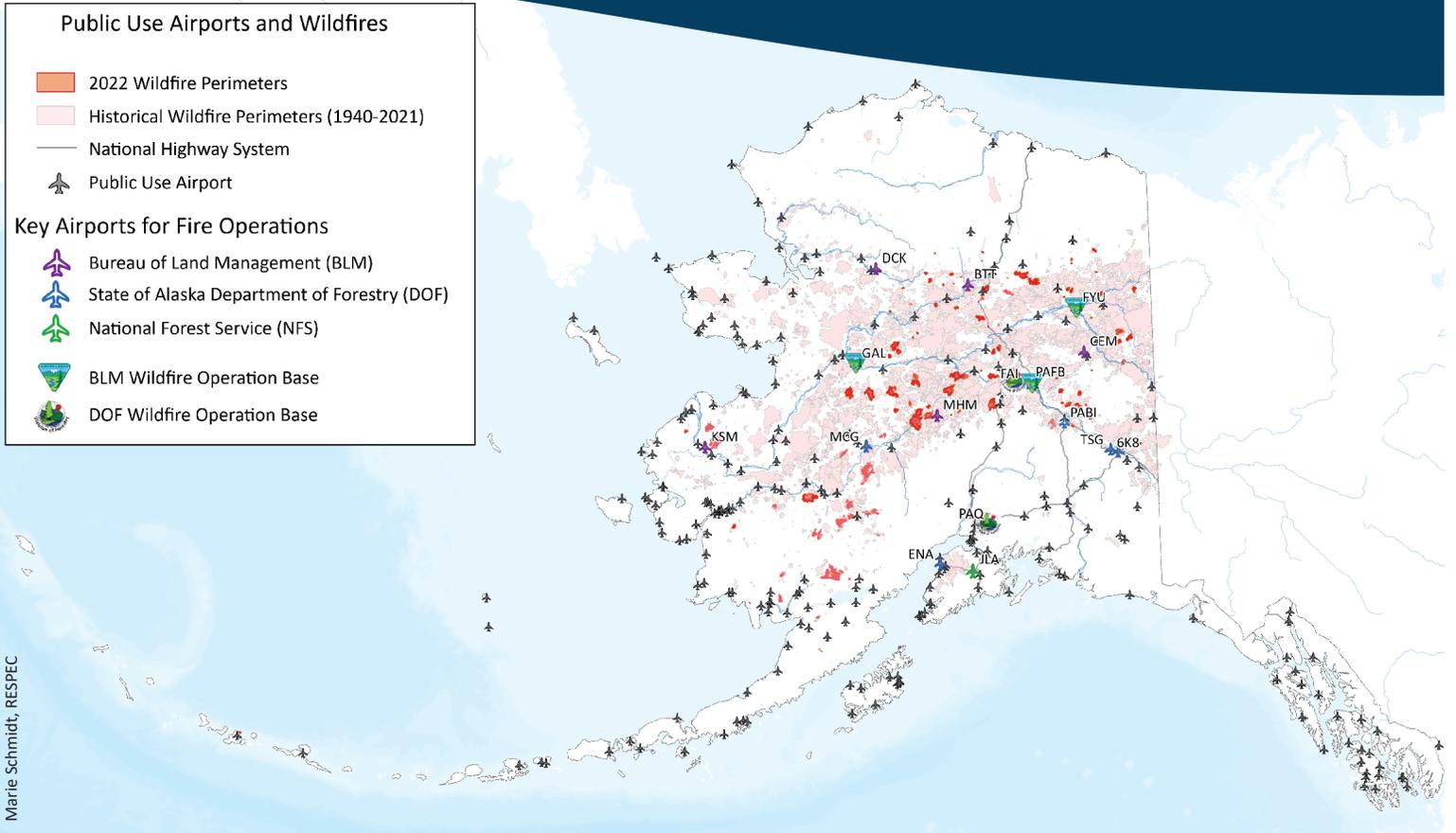
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BLM AFS Chena Hotshot Crew hikes out of a dozer line constructed around St. Mary's on June 9, 2022.

### IN THIS ISSUE:

- |                               |                                     |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Airports Support Firefighting | Air Time Q&A                        |
| Team Member Spotlight         | Coach Class: Website News & Updates |
| FAA News & Updates            | AASP Project Update                 |
| In the Works                  |                                     |



Historical fire locations, Alaska airports, and key airports for fire operations.

areas, as illustrated on the map. The agencies provide fire protection and suppression services to any fires within their area, regardless of the specific jurisdiction or land manager where it occurs. The agencies coordinate closely with these jurisdictions and landowners to ensure that fire response aligns with local management plans and policies. Each agency's protection area is split into smaller geographic areas (DOF) or zones (BLM AFS). Each agency has an arsenal of preparedness resources (equipment and personnel) suited to the needs of the area they serve.

**Bureau of Land Management Alaska Fire Service**

Based at Fort Wainwright's Ladd Army Air Field (LAAF), BLM AFS's protection area covers 191.5 million acres located mainly in northern and western Alaska. The agency also maintains turn-key and seasonal fire bases at the Galena and Fort Yukon airports.



Bettles, Dall Creek, Central, and Lake Minchumina airstrips are other key locations often used for fire response.

BLM Alaska has four out of seven nationally-owned aircraft based in the state, including a PC-12 Pilatus and a Quest Kodiak that serve wildfire response, habitat survey, and personnel transport needs. In addition, the BLM contracts aircraft annually for Alaska's wildfire season, including four water-scooping Fire Boss Single Engine Air Tractor aircraft.

According to Tom Kubichek, BLM AFS State Aviation Manager, "without the airstrips in the state, we could not do our jobs." With the Dalton, Steese, and Elliott Highways only providing access to a fraction of BLM AFS's protection area, AFS relies on all airports and airstrips statewide since they never know exactly where the next fire will occur. In the 2022 fire season, BLM AFS coordinated closely with the St. Mary's Airport Manager and equipment operators to hold briefings and stage initial air attack operations for the nearby East Fork Fire from the airport's



BLM-owned Quest Kodiak 100 parked at the airstrip in Lake Minchumina on August 10th, 2022, with Denali in the background.

facilities. DOT&PF equipment operators based at St. Mary's participated in daily briefings along with firefighting and aviation staff and assisted with creating a dozer line to protect the village during the East Fork response.

**State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources Division of Forestry & Fire Protection**

The DOF responds to 153.9 million acres, located primarily in southcentral and southwestern Alaska. The DOF, with its protection area comprising both remote and

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road-accessible communities, utilizes both fixed and rotary wing aircraft as well as ground-based fire engines in its firefighting operations. DOF owns four aircraft for logistics and aerial supervision and coordination of the contracted tankers: a de Havilland Beaver, two Aero Commanders, and one Cessna Caravan. The agency also has two exclusive use contracts for air tankers, a Convair 580 turboprop air tanker based out of Fairbanks and Bombardier Q-400 twin turboprop air tanker based in Palmer under the current contract. While BLM AFS is the primary contracting agency for Fire Boss aircraft in Alaska, DOF can call for additional Fire Boss support as the season demands, and did so this year, gaining assistance from six Fire Boss aircraft from British Columbia and two from Washington State. DOF maintains a permanent fire base headquartered at the Palmer airport, complete with a hangar for offices, personnel support areas, aircraft storage, and maintenance facilities.

Previously based at Fort Wainwright, DOF has shifted to standing up its seasonal aviation tanker fire base at FAI and now has a 55-year lease on a portion of FAI's south apron. The FAI seasonal base includes space for tanker staging and refilling and a small lawn area with modular living quarters for personnel, housing between 5-15 people throughout the season. According to Jason Jordet, DOF Fixed Wing Aviation Manager, the agency hopes to upgrade the

seasonal FAI base into a more permanent site, similar to the Palmer DOF fire base. FAI Airport Operations Officer Carmen Lobsinger noted that the DOF firefighting base at FAI has grown consistently each year, with more personnel and greater aircraft activity to support fire response. The DOF also has smaller air tanker reload bases at the Kenai, McGrath, and Tanacross airports, and at Allen Army Airfield at Fort Greely.

In 2022, DOF air tankers delivered 192 loads (450,000 gallons) of fire retardant from the FAI base to fight nearby fires, including the large Clear Fire—a “big year” according to Jordet. The Palmer fire base supported several firefighting operations in the Copper River Valley, and the Tanacross base supported operations at fires between Tok and Delta Junction, including at Dot Lake. DOT&PF and DOF are currently coordinating to explore upgrades to the Tok airport that could support DOF firefighting operations in the region.

**U.S. Forest Service – Region 10**

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Region 10 Alaska Fire, Fuels, and Aviation staff coordinate fire protection and suppression efforts for 27.6 million acres in Alaska, primarily located in southeast's Tongass National Forest and southcentral's Chugach National Forest regions. The agency responds to National Forest lands as well as other jurisdictions' lands within their area, including State lands, Alaska Native allotments, and Alaska Native corporation lands. Due to the

landscape of the National Forest lands—primarily rocky, glacial, and rain forested—these fires are typically relatively small, human-started, and adjacent to the road system, trails, and recreational areas. Due to their proximity to people and communities, these fires typically receive an immediate response and full suppression.

While the USFS sees fewer acres burned each season than the BLM AFS or DOF, the agency is integrally involved in fire response statewide when additional resources are needed, for example sending firefighting crews across the state to assist with operations. Alternately, when the National Forestlands do see a heavy fire season, the BLM AFS and DOF reciprocate with resources such as fixed wing aircraft and helicopters if needed. U.S. Forest Service – Region 10 does not maintain aviation assets in its preparedness-level resources, meaning it does not own or keep such assets on-hand to prepare for a typical fire season. Unlike the other agencies, it does not maintain exclusive use aviation contracts but does sometimes access the “call-when-needed” aircraft

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*Eight large water-scooping aircraft (CL-415s and CL-215Ts) sit at Ladd Army Air Field (LAAF) on Fort Wainwright in July 2022.*



*A DOF-contracted Q-400 twin turboprop air tanker sits on the Palmer Airport runway.*



*DOF-owned de Havilland Beaver at Nakochna River Lodge near Skwentna assisting with the Kichatna Fire in June 2022.*



*A BLM AFS smokejumper's view of the Danger Point Fire on Popof Island in May 2022, the farthest south jump in their 63-year history.*



Patrick Sinnett

Large holes were cut into the Departures bridge to install new ADA-compliant ramps.

According to Patrick, the most challenging, exciting, and best part of his work at ANC is the joint effort of coordination, collaboration, and cooperation between consultants, DOT&PF staff, and contractors to keep the airport running year round. According to DOT&PF Construction Project Manager

Mahear Abou Eid, Patrick's leadership and high level of communication ensured the success of the Terminal Loop Road project. Patrick made sure that signage was clear and concise for the public, that all parties involved were up-to-date and informed, and he went above and beyond to work closely with the contractor to accelerate construction prior to the summer tourist season. Congratulations, Patrick, for successfully wrapping up such a complex, visible, and impactful project this summer that will keep all Alaskans moving through ANC for many years to come.

## AASP Spotlight

Did you travel through Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport this summer? Then you probably noticed a major project happening on the airport's doorstep: the Anchorage Terminal Loop Road Improvements. This project brought ANC's upper-level departures ramp up to Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance with new wheel-chair accessible ramps. The project also included lighting system upgrades for the arrivals ramp below and a new protective coating for the bridge. All of this work was completed in just one summer, while ensuring minimal disruptions and delays for the traveling public.

Patrick Sinnett, of DOT&PF Central Region Construction, led this effort, while also coordinating a number of other projects occurring at Alaska's largest airport this summer.



Patrick Sinnett

The ANC Arrivals ramp after project completion.



## FAA NEWS & UPDATES

During fiscal year 2022, Alaska airports received about \$382 million in federal grant funds from the FAA Airport Improvement Program (AIP). These funds are used by public use airports within the National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems (NPIAS) for a variety of planning and development projects to improve airport infrastructure and facilities. During fiscal year 2022, Alaska airports received AIP grant funds ranging from \$22,000 up to \$70 million. The ten airports that received the highest amounts of AIP funds are shown in the bar graph below.

### Top 10 Alaska Airports by FY22 AIP Funds

Amounts are in millions of dollars



In other FAA news, two new updated Advisory Circulars were published in September: [AC 150/5200-18D, Airport Safety Self-Inspection \(27 September 2022\)](#) and [AC 150/5190-4B, Airport Land Use Compatibility Planning \(15 September 2022\)](#).



AASP

Anchorage (ANC) airport.

## In The Works ...

The Needs Directory is a powerful reporting tool which is undergoing some modifications to make it more user friendly and readable. We will be providing some new filters so individual facilities can also be reported. Stay tuned for more updates on this in a future newsletter edition.



## AirTime

### Q How is facility data on the AASP website updated?

**A**irport Master Record (5010) data is automatically imported from the Federal Aviation Administration every 28 days. Other data fields are maintained by Alaska DOT&PF employees – planners, M&O staff, the Statewide Aviation team – and their consultants. NOTAMs are automatically updated and reported into the system (Facilities > General, Runways / Helipads, PCI Data, Services/Navcom, NOTAMs).



We are highly focused on data integrity as AASP analysis is only as good as the quality of data collected. The outcomes, reports, and information shared are rooted in effectively maintaining good data over time. Special thanks to all the team members that regularly complete updates!

### Q The last newsletter mentioned the internal Dashboard – what's new?

**A**The AASP team has been working on an internal page dashboard design and implementation to facilitate navigation on the AASP website and to provide a first stop for key information on the aviation program. The team selected dashboard system alerts, key reports, and informative charts. The goal is to share both high level data and facility specific information – while allowing users to determine which facilities are relevant to them. You can experience it all firsthand. Use the Help subtab to learn more on setting up your individual dashboard settings (Home > Help) and check out the Landing Page charts that provide real-time system overviews (Home > Landing Page).

## Coach Class

### Setting up your Internal Dashboard



By Annette Lapkowski, PE, Panther International Project Manager

You can customize your internal Dashboard by selecting which airports are reported on the Dashboard. Go to My Account (Step 1) by selecting the button in the top banner. Then select Dashboard Settings (Step 2). Here, the default landing page can be selected (Step 3) along with the facilities (Steps 4 & 5) which will then be reported on the Updates/Shortcuts tab (My Account, see A bottom screen shot).

Once you customize your Dashboard, you will start to see updates and alerts. These alerts are shown under three different groupings: Action Items, Airport Updates, and Project Updates (Home > Updates/Shortcuts, see B bottom screen shot). Each grouping has unique alerts that are triggered by system actions initiated by different users. General alerts are shown in Actions Items in the top table while updates related to Airports and Projects are shown in the bottom tables. In between the tables are some one-click reports shortcuts and a quick link to the Query Tool tab (see C bottom screen shot).

**Got Help? We sure do!**  
Help is on the way. Whether it's a one-time task or a regular routine you need assistance with—no problem. Head over to the Help tab and take a look at the available resources. There is a document to view online or download and videos to assist (Home > Help).



Smoke rising over the Kenai Lake Overlook Fire along the Seward Highway near Cooper Landing in May 2022. The fire started on Kenai Peninsula Borough land and spread into Chugach National Forest. DOF helped local and USFS responders to suppress the fire.

pool during particularly high activity fire seasons. Due to the varied nature of National Forestlands terrain, the USFS has the ability to mount a multi-modal response to fires—utilizing initial attack ground crews, wildland fire engines, fixed and rotary wing aircraft, and even travel by boat to get the job done.

The USFS fire response in Alaska also relies heavily on local airports and airstrips to protect people and property within their region. According to Bobette Rowe, Assistant Director for Fire Operations, Region 10, the Alaska National Forestlands see a larger fire about every 4-5 years, typically in the Chugach. Since there are no permanent established Alaska fire bases for the USFS, local air strips, for example at

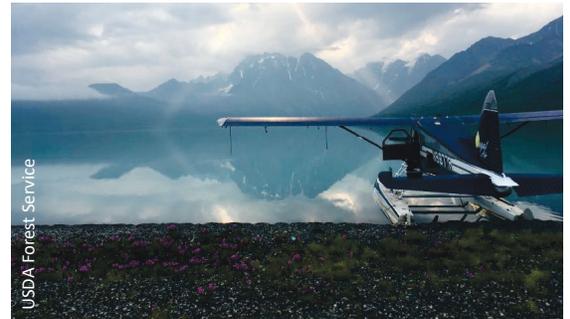
Cooper Landing, become instrumental in accessing active fire areas. Resource flights for the Forest Service also commonly use the Moose Pass air strip for helicopter and fixed wing operations, so that staff don't need to travel all the way to ANC or Merrill Field to gain access to remote areas in the Kenai Peninsula.

During the 2022 fire season, USFS and DOF mounted a joint response to the Kenai Lake Overlook Fire that began on Kenai Peninsula Borough lands along the Seward Highway near the DOT&PF highway bypass project and Cooper Landing. The DOF assisted USFS by responding with a helicopter to monitor the blaze, and the two agencies coordinated their suppression efforts to stop the fire's advance.

#### How did the 2022 Fire Season Compare?

The 2022 Alaska fire season saw 596 fires with over 3.1 million acres burned, a milestone hit for the first time since 2015. Of those, 199 fires burned 1.5 million acres within the BLM AFS's protection area and 366 fires burned

close to another 1.6 million acres in the DOF protection area. The USFS reported a fairly standard season with 31 fires in the National Forests and around 12 acres burned. (Alaska Interagency Coordination Center Dashboards). Statewide, total aviation resources utilized in 2022 included 275 fixed wing and 122 helicopter orders as well as 108 smokejumper loads and an additional 179 smokejumper boosters from the Lower 48 (akfireinfo.com). **The 2022 fire season came in 7th overall since accurate records started being kept in 1950.**



Small float planes are commonly used by the USFS to transport supplies and resource personnel throughout the Tongass National Forest's remote, rugged, and wet terrain.

## AASP PROJECT UPDATE

The AASP team had a busy fall conducting research and collecting inventory information to update the AASP website. The website is a vital part of the state's effort to share up-to-date airport information with the public. What many users don't know is that the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) Program Development Staff and Regional Airport Planners utilize the information gathered and stored on the internal AASP website to develop, track, and prioritize projects. With 237 state-owned airports in three regions, the DOT&PF has an enormous amount of information to track and the AASP website assists in this effort.

The Capital Improvement and Maintenance Program (CIMP) Technical Advisory Group (TAG) completed a comprehensive

overhaul of the inspection checklists as a first step in streamlining the process and website. This daunting task was successful entirely due to the expertise and dedication of the regional M&O Specialists and Airport Planners. The entire team is looking forward to continuing the process to make CIMP inspections more efficient and consistent across the state.

The team is looking forward to starting several new tasks this winter, including convening a Work Group to identify topics for informative airport videos, as well as kicking off an in-depth study of airport construction best practices for increased infrastructure resiliency.



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