Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Close Call

Date: June 20, 2025

Location: Bear Creek #237 Fire
Alaska

This incident presented significant operational and safety challenges due to gaps in radio communication and reliance on cell phone calls to Dispatch for critical updates

In mid-June 2025, Alaska's delayed fire season shifted dramatically when a high-pressure ridge brought hot, dry weather and widespread lightning, sparking numerous fires across the interior. On June 19, two smoke columns were reported near Healy, Alaska. The fire, named Bear Creek #237, was estimated at 20 acres, burning in continuous black spruce with flame lengths reaching 30-40 feet with Rank 5 fire behavior (*an extremely vigorous surface fire or an active crown fire that exhibits moderate to long-range spotting and independent spot fire growth*).

Multiple structures were identified within three to four miles of the fire. With limited road access to the fire itself, responding engines focused on structure protection while helitack and smokejumpers were requested.

Due to multiple fire starts on this day and heavy initial attack demand, no smokejumpers or helitack were available to respond. Reports from later in the evening indicated the Bear Creek #237 Fire had diminished fire activity, possibly because of precipitation, and resource needs would be reassessed in the morning

Lead plane mid-day on June 20 on the Bear Creek #237 Fire. Photo by Chris Swisher of the Bureau of Land Management.

Air Attack, Air Tankers, Smokejumpers Requested

By the following morning, local fire managers recognized the fire's potential and requested Air Attack along with two air tankers. At 1033, a lead plane and two air tankers were dispatched to the Bear Creek #237 Fire. At 1128, two scoopers were requested for the fire, however none were available.

At 1141, the Engine Incident Commander reported that air tankers alone would not be successful. The fire was burning in black spruce and fire behavior was beginning to pick up. The Engine IC requested helitack or smokejumpers to respond. At 1144, an additional air tanker and one load of smokejumpers were ordered. J-17 arrived on scene at 1214 and proceeded with jump operations, deploying six smokejumpers.

The smokejumpers estimated that the fire was around 40-50 acres when they arrived. A jump spot in proximity to the fire's left flank that had retardant applied earlier in the shift was selected. Before leaving the jump ship, they identified multiple escape routes, including a wet drainage about two miles away, and closer hardwood stands. After collecting their jump gear, they began to cut a helispot to facilitate future logistical support.

The Bear Creek #237 Fire from the Parks Highway around 1800 hours on June 20. Photo by Kale Casey.

Fire Intensity Increases

Communications between the smokejumpers and Dispatch were established via cell phone. Around 1322, fire intensity increased and evacuation orders for the structures in proximity to the fire are moved to "Go". The lead plane reports that the fire has doubled in size and is 100 percent active and not catchable. The two scoopers with
lead plane ordered earlier in the day are canceled due to this change in activity and perceived lack of suppression effectiveness.

A weather cell is observed moving in from the west, which is noted could further influence fire behavior and limit aerial operations. However, this information is not relayed to the smokejumpers. At 1336, the Engine IC transfers command to the JIC (Jumper in Charge). While the two air tankers work the fire, the smokejumpers continue to construct their helispot south of the heel of the fire with the intent to be shuttled via helicopter to the structures to begin protection measures.

At 1430, the smokejumpers are informed that no helicopter is available to provide extraction from their helispot. However, 15 minutes later it is communicated that a National Guard UH 60 Blackhawk Type 1 Helicopter will be enroute for the shuttle. A one-hour ETA is given.

The jumper's initial helispot was planned for a smaller helicopter. Efforts are therefore made to improve the spot for the larger UH 60. Due to the change in tactics from direct attack to point protection, the lead plane and air tankers that were working the fire are released at 1458. As the lead plane departs, they inform the jumpers that they were in a "good place".

At 1738, the IC relays to Dispatch that fire behavior has increased and it is too late (to be picked up by the Type 2 helicopter). They have departed the helispot and are moving with purpose toward a wet drainage to outrun the fire.

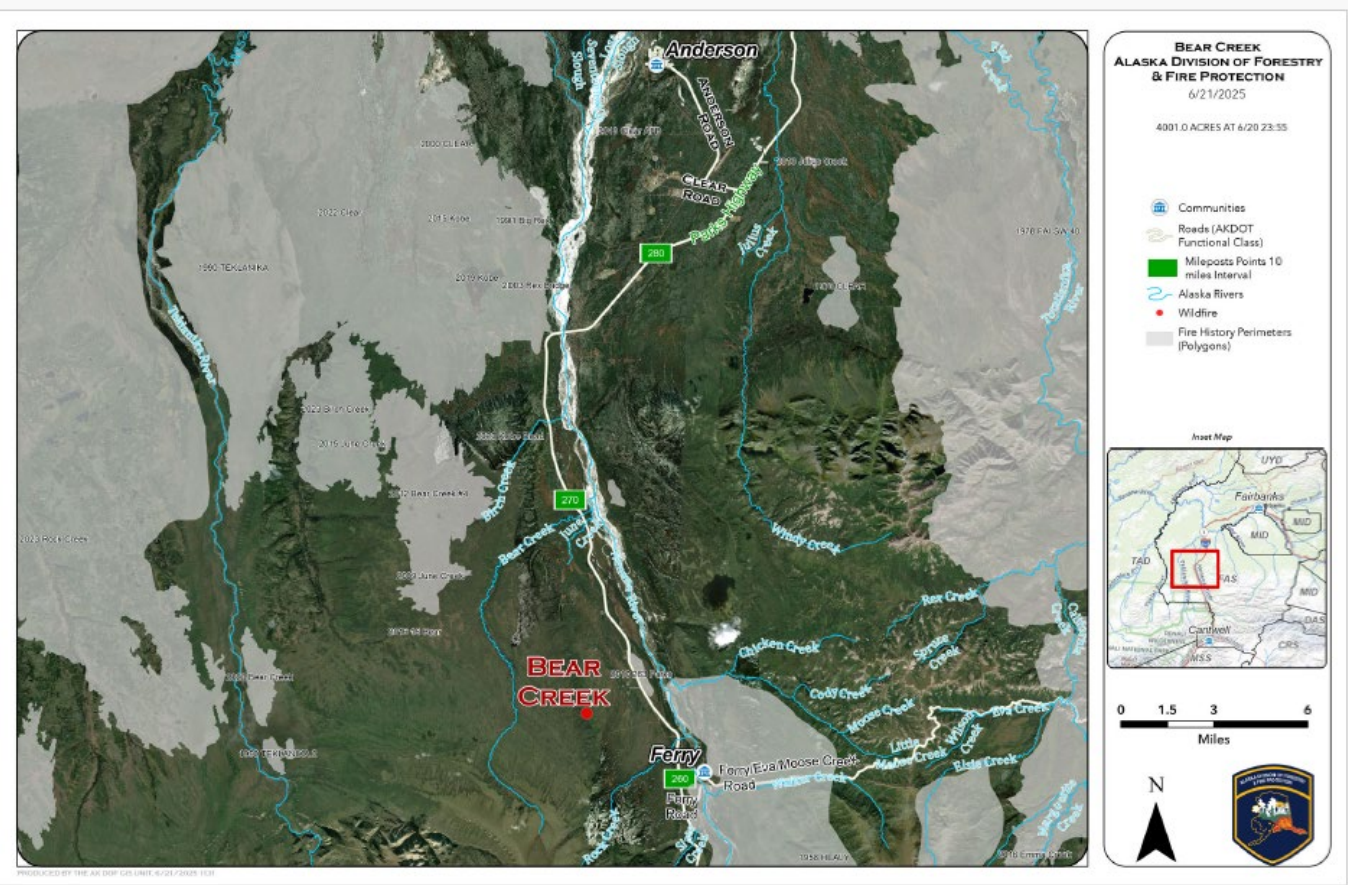
An "Emergency Situation"

Around 1530, the IC asks Dispatch about the status of the UH 60. However, because the UH 60 is a National Guard ship there was no automated flight following (AFF) available or radio communication. Therefore, the status of the ship is unknown. The IC then requests another helicopter to be dispatched. The IC also asks Dispatch to confirm repeater frequency—but gets no response. A few minutes later, Dispatch calls and lets the IC know that a helicopter will be enroute from Fairbanks or Palmer with a 40-minute ETA. Next, at 1600, Dispatch relays that the helicopter has been diverted to a higher priority and a second ship has been ordered. The IC asks Dispatch about the availability of Air Attack and is told none is available.

As the smokejumpers are waiting on the arrival of a helicopter, a wind shift occurs. The IC instructs the jumpers to gather their gear into the helispot. At 1707, as they complete preparing their jump gear, Dispatch calls letting the IC know that a Type 2 helicopter would be enroute "shortly" to pick them up.

At 1738, the IC relays to Dispatch that fire behavior has increased and it is too late, they have departed the helispot and are moving with purpose toward a wet drainage to stay ahead of the fire. The IC gives Dispatch their general location and destination and asks for retardant, helicopter, and Air Attack.

Around 1802, multiple aircraft are diverted from other incidents to respond to what is referenced as an "Emergency Situation". As the fire grew aggressively, the jumpers were moving away from the active fire with purpose and, at approximately 1830, they eventually assembled in a hardwood patch as the fire flanked them.



An After Action Review is Warranted

Around this same time, air resources arrived on scene and retardant was deployed between the fire and the location of the jumpers. After the retardant was dropped between the firefighters and the fire, a helicopter arrived and hovered above the smokejumpers, guiding them to an opening in the spruce where they were able to be picked in two loads—bringing them to a gravel pit two miles away, adjacent to the Parks Highway.

Unfortunately, some jump gear and supplies were lost to the fire. Fortunately, no injuries were reported.

Due to the nature of the events surrounding this incident, it was determined that an After Action Review was warranted. Because the jumpers were able to use their pre-identified escape routes (wet drainage) and safety zones (hardwood stands) it was agreed this incident did not meet the definition of an entrapment.

In the boreal forest, absent excessive drought, hardwood-dominated stands (post green-up) with little spruce component can serve as effective safety zones.

Lessons

The After Action Review Highlighted Key Lessons:

- The importance of confirming and maintaining aviation support before committing crews on the ground;
- Recognizing that Alaska's peak fire behavior can occur later in the afternoon;
- Ensuring multiple escape routes and safety zones are always identified;
- The need for better real-time coordination between IC, Air Attack, spotters, and dispatch—especially when aviation resources are stretched thin;
- Further examination of communication effectiveness and methods will be addressed in follow-up discussions.

Summary and Safety Concerns

This incident presented significant operational and safety challenges due to gaps in radio communication and reliance on cell phone calls to Dispatch-side phones for critical updates.

- Multiple key updates (wind shift, change in extraction plan, fire proximity) were relayed late or indirectly due to non-radio communication.
- Dispatch was at times dependent on secondary reports instead of direct communication from the IC or aircraft.
- The lack of consistent radio traffic delayed situational awareness and increased risk to the smokejumpers on the ground during an advancing fire.

Safety Implications

- Direct radio communication ensures real-time situational awareness for all responding units.
- Cell phone updates limit information sharing to a single recipient and increase the risk of missed or delayed life-safety messages.
- Emergency resource diversions (tankers, scoopers, helicopters) rely on rapid, reliable communication—delays in this chain directly impact responder safety.
- Regular radio contact also allows Dispatch to maintain resource accountability and meet logistical needs such as ordering food and supplies.

Best Practices

A radio-first approach for all ground and air resources during emergency operations helps ensure a common operating picture. Dispatch should receive and record all critical updates over assigned incident frequencies, with cell phone use reserved only for redundancy when radios fail.

Consistent use of incident frequencies for all operational updates helps ensure consistent communication, faster response times, and improved safety for all personnel.

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