

TUNDRA DILEMMA BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET # 3

Some areas in SW Alaska should be categorized as limited action areas where fires are mainly monitored but not fought. The people who live a subsistence lifestyle in this area are very dependent on reindeer herds that prefer the lichens that are destroyed by hot fires. Should another level of protection be given those areas to help maintain the reindeer herds that these people are so dependent upon?

PROBLEMS FROM FIRE

There is a problem with establishing some areas of SW Alaska as limited action areas where fires are only monitored unless they threaten lands in other higher valued categories or critical sites within the area. The value of the resources lost during a fire in these areas would be much less than the cost of fighting those fires.

Reindeer herds are kept in this area and support much of the local subsistence economy. Most people agree that the lichens that are burned in very hot fires are a preferred food for caribou and reindeer. These lichens may not revegetate these areas for 15-100 years, depending upon the severity of the burn and the environmental conditions of the area. This does not present a serious problem for caribou that can move to other areas for winter food. The reindeer cannot be moved to a new area so these fires may have a devastating effect on these herds and the people who depend upon them.

ADVANTAGES OF FIRE

Fast shallow burns may increase the lichen cover, especially where thick carpets of mosses have developed. These burns may favor the growth of some lichen species preferred by caribou and reindeer.

Some burns may also increase the early spring plant growth for reindeer and waterfowl. A fire in the Selawik area caused an increase from 21.0 ducks per square mile to 33.3 ducks per square mile the next year.