*Short-interval reburning changes fuel structure of boreal forests*

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**Abstract: (213/250, from GPRM)**

Rapidly warming temperatures in Alaska have driven shifts in the frequency of forest fires, particularly in the frequency of reburns occurring in short intervals (50 years or less). Short-interval reburning in Alaska is occurring in frequencies and magnitudes outside of historic norms and drives shifts in regenerating forest communities from conifer to deciduous species. In the past, deciduous landscapes have been assumed to act as a self-regulating negative feedback to future burning, due to their lower physical flammability compared to conifer counterparts. However, the strength or duration of that self-regulation remains unknown, particularly under changing fire weather and emerging novel forest communities. One first step in examining potential future fire behavior in emerging deciduous landscapes is evaluating the ‘fuel-scape’: the abundance, composition, and connectivity of fuels across a landscape scale. To help inform broader research on the future of the boreal fire regime, we examine the fuel-scape in novel deciduous landscapes emerging as a result of continued short-interval reburning. We quantified fuel composition, abundance, and fine-scale connectivity in stands in Interior Alaska after 1, 2 or 3 fires in short-intervals, and present initial estimates here. This work provides crucial insight into the mechanistic drivers of fire activity into the boreal under changing fire regimes and will inform future fire management efforts under drying conditions.

**Keywords**:

## Introduction

Shortening fire intervals are causing continued reburning in Interior Alaska that drive stand-level transitions from conifer-dominated forests to deciduous shrublands and grasslands (Hayes and Buma 2021, Johnstone et al. 2010). Future characteristics (including frequency, severity and area burned) of the boreal fire regime and of boreal forests themselves remain unclear under those circumstances. Increased presence of deciduous species may act as a negative feedback to future fire, as deciduous communities in the boreal are typically considered less flammable (CITE). Here, we define the deciduous negative feedback as…. However, the strength, reliability and potential duration of a negative feedback derived from an increased presence of deciduous plants remains unclear, given that ongoing reburning is shifting community composition past historic norms. Here, we focus on investigating the strength of the negative feedback driven by increased deciduous presence through investigating the relationship between fuels and fire behavior in emerging deciduous stands.

Fuel abundance, connectivity, and distribution shape stand-scale flammability. Research on interactions between fires in other systems suggests that legacy effects of previous fires interact strongly with subsequent fires to shape future forest composition and structure (lots, Harris et al. 2020, other compound disturbance papers). Specifically, previous fires alter the distribution and abundance of fuels (particularly CWD) within a stand, which through subsequent effects on soil, litter cover and shade may alter post-fire seedling establishment and survival (Harris et al. 2020). Here, we use the term “fuel-scape” as shorthand for the abundance and connectivity of fuels across a landscape.

To examine the relationship between community type and fuel-scapes as driven by shortening fire intervals, we examined fine-scale fuel loads in reburned stands in Interior Alaska before modeling fire behavior in stands with differing numbers of short interval fires.

Position of trees / arrangement of trees around it influence whether the tree will burn or not (Linn et al. 2005)

Several lines of evidence point to a weakening or override of the hypothesized deciduous negative feedback to burning. First, modern patterns of community composition, when viewed in the context of paleoecological records, suggest the deciduous feedback has been overridden. A synthesis of paleoecological records shows that present fire regimes may have surpassed past vegetation-induced limits given the shift in community composition (Kelly et al. 2013). Paleoecological community types are not analogous to modern emerging deciduous communities in Alaska: mid-Holocene boreal deciduous environments were dominated by birch (Higuera et al. 2008) while recent studies have found alder, aspen, and even willow in dominant quantities in modern boreal forests after multiple reburns (Hayes and Buma 2021). Preliminary observations of emerging deciduous landscapes in Interior Alaska(Hayes and Buma 2021) demonstrate that stand structure changes dramatically across a 1-3 short-interval fire gradient, with three burns resulting in more open, shrubby structure with increased presence of willow. The role of stand structure in shaping fuel distributions () strengthens the argument that paleoecological studies are not a perfect analogue for modern changing landscapes (i.e., ), and that specific modern empirical data on the spatial distribution of fuel elements is required to both evaluate the presence of a deciduous feedback and to inform future management directions.

Secondly, the fire seasons of 2004 and 2005 are tangible examples of modern burning exceeding historic or paleoecologic analogs. Fires in the summer of 2004 burned XXX area within the season than any other year in Alaska’s 58-year historical fire record (find something recent). During those seasons, fires burned spruce and deciduous stands at similar frequencies (Kasischke et al. 2010). This pattern of burning suggests that deciduous stands burn as frequently as coniferous stands under modern extreme conditions. Extreme fire seasons (like the ones in 2004 and 2005) are expected to increase with increasingly warm and dry summers (Balshi et al. 2009). It is possible that emerging deciduous stands will not be exempt from future fire activity and may burn in higher frequencies or severities than in the past. Novel community types in combination with extreme climate-driven fire weather may enable fire to overcome previous feedbacks. Understanding the future characteristics of boreal fire regimes requires evaluating the strength of increased deciduous species acting as a negative feedback for future burning under modern climatic conditions.

This study has two objectives: 1) evaluate how the fuel-scape (fuel composition, density, and distribution) changes with increasing short-interval reburns while considering differences in overstory community composition and 2) compare modeled fire rate of spread and biomass consumed to ground metrics collected in objective 1. To that effect, we ask 3 specific research questions: 1) how does the abundance of fuel change with continued reburning? 2) how does the connectivity of fuels change with continued reburning? 3) do the trends in fuel patterns identified in 1 and 2 lead to differing trends in modeled fire rate spread?

In contrast to previous studies that examine the distribution of fuel elements after a single fire event, here we assess fuel-scapes in boreal stands that have experienced between 1 to 3 short-interval sequential fires. We hypothesize fuel connectivity and abundance will increase initially with additional fires but decrease after three short-interval fires as reburns continue to consume fuel. In addition, we expect fire behavior may differ across both reburns and community type, given the difference in stand structure created by different dominating vegetation.

## Methods

### ***Study Area***

To investigate the role of reburns in altering spatial distributions of fuel, we sampled spatial patterns of fuel abundance and distribution in two locations in Interior Alaska. Each site has experienced between 1-3 fires within >30-year intervals and between both locations, 42 plots were established randomly within burn perimeters XX meters apart and XX meters from roads. 8 additional plots were established in unburned remnants as a reference of assumed pre-fire conditions.

### ***Field Sampling***

We measured Downed woody debris fuel loads (DWD, dead wood lying or standing below <45-degree angle) using two 28-m brown’s fuel transects (Brown 1974) radiating from the center of each 20m-by-20m plot. We recorded diameter, species, presence of charred material and decay class of 1000-hour fuels across the full transect and counted <3 cm debris across subsets (1-hr = 2m, 10-hr = 5 m, 100-hr = 15m). Total fuel loading (tons/ha) was calculated by converting DWD field data into estimates of mass per area (grams per meter) following Brown 1974. We measured fuel depth by recording height of the tallest vegetation connected continuously to the forest floor across 2-meter increments of the Brown’s transect line. Fine fuel loading… (tons/ha)…

To expand on those metrics and capture the 3D patterns of fuels, we evaluated the spatial patterns of fuels directly, using a modified 3D sampling framework developed by Hawley et al. 2018. This framework allows for measurements of fuel biomass at scales and dimensions useful for characterizing heterogeneity in fuels within a stand. The 3D fuels sampling protocol uses a 3D rectangular sampling frame (1x1x1 meters large) to collect fuel data at the scale of the entire frame (0.25 m3), the fuel stratum (0.025 m3) and the individual voxel (0.001 m3). We randomly placed 10 3D sampling frames within each plot, recording presence and absence of all fuel types (1/10/100/1000-hour fuels, forbs, shrubs, graminoids, feathermoss) within each voxel cell (n = 16). We also recorded the dominant ground cover within each sampling frame.

To calculate spatial dispersion of ground vs. standing fuel elements, we measured the distance to nearest tree of each species present on the plot from each of the 10 sampling cubes. We used the resulting measurements of a random point to each tree species to calculate Eberhardt’s statistic, a metric of dispersion, for each species across each plot (Hines and Hines 1979).

We estimated total biomass of each species using a suite of allometric equations (copy over the specific ones from biomass draft).

### ***Fire behavior modeling***

To model fire behavior based on estimated fuels structures in reburns, we used the HIGRAD/FIRETEC system, a physics-based fire behavior that represents individual ecosystem components and combustion/atmospheric interactions explicitly. HIGRAD/FIRETEC specifically treats vegetation composition and structure in three-dimensions, accounting for bulk density, surface area to volume ratio and fuel moisture. By treating fuel beds as complex and heterogenous (both vertically, and horizontally), HIGRAD/FIRETEC can simulate the effects of fine-scale shifts in fuels structure and composition on subsequent fire behavior. Examples of HIGRAD/FIRETEC being used?

Using this modeling framework, we modeled a suite of fire behavior metrics, including wind velocity, fire intensity, fire consumption and fire velocity. These metrics are direct links to fire behavior properties that direct subsequent total area burned, fire severity, and fire management conditions.

#### Modeling decisions

We used point process models to generate landscapes based on the data collected from our observational sites. Specifically, we simulated a distribution of trees and surface fuels across a 1000m by 400m landscape.

* understory fuel loads = understory vegetation weight + seedling weight / m2 [mean load, easiest way to do it]
* total number of trees per plot treats clumps as an individual

### ***Data Analysis***

We calculated and compared effect sizes of slope, aspect, and fire intervals on structural heterogeneity via generalized mixed modeling and boosted regression trees. …

## Results

### ***Fuel abundance***

CWD differed across reburn history, site, and size class (Fig. X). Fine fuels (1 and 10 hour fuels) were most abundant in once- and twice-burned plots in both the upland and lowland site, and decreased by a factor of X in thrice-burned plots, declining more in up vs low (?? - check which one / add factor).

**Figure X. Mass of fuel size classes across years since initial fire and between sites according to size classes.** [dots jittered to spread data]

**Chart, scatter chart

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### Fuel connectivity

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**FigX. Dispersal distances between species present at each plot, taken from a random point.**

**FigX. Heights of species**

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**Figure X. Fine fuel heights across interval from first fire and between sites. Tallest height of vegetation measured in 28-m transect lines and averaged across line.** Dots represent outliers.

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## Discussion

Several studies have invoked the presence of less-flammable deciduous species as a landscape management solution to boreal warming, based on paleoecological evidence of declining fire activity found alongside increases in birch pollen presence (Kelly et al. 2013, Brubaker et al. 2009).

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**Appendix**

**Figure X. Differences in fuel moisture between sites and across treatments. Normalized weight loss is measured as the water weight lost after drying (wet weight – dry weight), divided by the initial wet weight in grams.**

Chart, box and whisker chart

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