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

**Abstract:**

Increased reburning is driving shifts from conifer to deciduous dominated forests in Interior Alaska, driving questions about future characteristics of boreal fire regimes. Increased presence of deciduous species has been considered a negative feedback to subsequent fire activity due to changes in fuel structure and moisture content, but changes in fire weather and community composition have brought up questions about the strength or longevity of that negative feedback. Here we examine fuel type trends and the limit of the deciduous-flammability feedback by quantifying the effects of reburning on fuel arrangement and abundance and using those fuel patterns to simulate subsequent shifts in fire behavior. Our results suggest … This work provides crucial insight into the mechanistic drivers of fire activity into the boreal and will inform future fire management efforts under drying conditions.

## Introduction

Shortening fire intervals in Interior Alaska are driving stand-level transitions from conifer-dominated forests to deciduous shrublands and grasslands (Hayes and Buma 2021). Fire-driven community shifts in dominant tree species in the boreal (i.e., Hoy et al. 2016, Johnstone et al. 2010) suggests a potential negative feedback to fire enabled through the increased presence of deciduous-dominated landscapes (Astrup et al. 2018).

Several lines of evidence point to a weakening or override of the hypothesized deciduous feedback. First, modern patterns of burning, when viewed in context to paleoecological records, suggest the deciduous feedback has been overridden: Kelly et al. 2013 in a synthesis of paleoecological records suggest that present fire regimes may have surpassed the proposed vegetation-induced limits based on … . Shifting community types may have enabled patterns of fire to overcome previous feedbacks to burning: paleoecological community types are not analogous to modern emerging deciduous communities in Alaska. According to local lacustrine pollen records, past boreal 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, particularly after multiple reburns (Hayes and Buma 2021).

Secondly, preliminary observations of emerging deciduous landscapes (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.

Finally, the fire seasons of 2004 and 2005 are a tangible example of modern burning exceeding historic or paleoecologic analogs. Fires in the summer of 2004 burned more area within the season than any other year in Alaska’s 58-year historical fire record (Todd and Jewkes 2006). During those record-breaking seasons, fires burned spruce and deciduous stands at similar frequencies (Kasischke et al. 2010). This pattern of burning suggests that deciduous stands can burn under modern extreme conditions. As extreme fire seasons (like the ones in 2004 and 2005) are expected to increase with increasing 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 ways that diverge from past patterns. Understanding the future characteristics of boreal fire regimes requires evaluating the strength of a potential negative feedback to burning driven by increasing presence of deciduous species under modern climatic and vegetation conditions.

[lit review of modern landscape-scale flammability/cover type analyses]

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.

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 between upland and lowland contexts and 2) compare modeled fire rate of spread and biomass consumed to ground metrics collected in (1).

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 Design

To investigate the role of reburns in altering spatial distributions of fuel, we sampled spatial patterns of fuel abundance and distribution in two sites 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. 8 additional plots were established in unburned remnants as a reference of assumed pre-fire conditions.

#### Field Sampling

Downed woody debris fuel loads (DWD, dead wood lying or standing below <45-degree angle) were measured using two 28-m transects (also referred to as brown’s lines, 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…

Fuel depth was measured 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 (2x2x1 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 for each species across each plot (CITE).

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 homogenous (both vertically, and horizontally), HIGRAD/FIRETEC can simulate the effects of fine-scale shifts in fuels structure and composition on subsequent fire behavior.

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.

**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 as reflected by coarse-woody debris counts differed across reburn history, site and size class (Fig. X).

**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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**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**

The presence of less-flammable deciduous species has been invoked 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.**

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