

Morels likely to be harder to find this year than last

By DAN JOLING
The Associated Press

Published in the Anchorage Daily News/May 1, 2006

Alaska's mushroom experts are predicting a less-than-bumper year for harvesting morels since most are expected to grow well off the state's road system.

That may be just as well for land managers.

Morels were abundant last year but state officials estimate just 14 percent of commercial pickers complied with rules requiring them to pay 20 cents per pound for harvesting on public land.

Federal regulators say pickers probably grossly underreported the amount they picked. Overseeing an honor system that relied on pickers to report how much they bagged, they found many pickers less than honorable.

Morel mushrooms, treasured in French cooking, thrive on forest land a year after it's disturbed by fire. In 2004, 6.6 million acres of Alaska's forests burned, the most ever. Many fires were along Alaska's road system, making for relatively easy mushroom pickings.

Trish Wurtz, a U.S. Forest Service research ecologist, estimated 175,000 pounds were picked commercially, based on reporting by buyers. Fees were paid on only about 25,000 pounds, earning public agencies about \$5,000.

Mushroom buyers paid \$4 to \$10 per pound for fresh morels, federal officials said. Pickers had an incentive to underreport, Wurtz said.

"We literally had migrant workers coming to Alaska to make a buck," she said.

A key factor in the run on Alaska last year was a shortage of picking areas in the Pacific Northwest. A lack of fires meant few mushrooms available. Buyers who invested in equipment needed to at least break even and headed north, said Carole Huey of the federal Bureau of Land Management.

"That's why they all came up," Huey said.

Another 4.4 million acres burned in 2005, the No. 3 year on record. Unlike the year before, most fires were off the road system. Given the difficulty in reaching that acreage, and the availability of mushrooms elsewhere, officials predict less picking in Alaska this year.

"Unless somebody plans to go and helicopter in, I can't imagine there's going to be any commercial harvest this year," Wurtz said.

Anticipating a mushroom boom a year ago, the University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service put on workshops in rural communities, showing villagers how to pick, dry and market morels. State and federal land managers formed a "mushroom task force" to brace for problems with picking seen in other states and developed the permit and fee system.

Compliance with those rules was another matter.

"It was kind of problematic for us," said Frank Maxwell, a manager at the Division of Mining, Land and Water in Fairbanks. "There's a lot of demands for personnel, and the distances are vast."

Much of the morel buying was centered on Tok, 175 miles from Fairbanks on the Alaska Highway, and near the start of the 160-mile Taylor Highway, where many of the 2004 fires raged. Mushroom pickers scattered onto public lands by foot, four-wheelers, boats and aircraft, Maxwell said.

Division personnel spotted cars parked at picking areas and their license plates did not correspond with permit holders, Maxwell said. Unlike Alaska State Troopers who enforce fishing and hunting laws, Natural Resources personnel have no power to issue citations.

"It's a little difficult to keep track of them," Maxwell said.

The minimum commercial permit cost \$50 and entitled a picker to 250 pounds of morels, Huey said. When that amount was reached, pickers were required to renew and increase their total.

The BLM sold 101 permits, good on both state and federal land. Just three people renewed.

One crew of eight from Arizona bought one permit for \$50. They picked for 30 days and told a newspaper reporter they averaged 900 pounds per day, which would have worked out to be 27,000 pounds. BLM officials left notes on their distinctive purple van, telling them they needed to renew their permit.

"They never came in," Huey said.

For 2006, pickers should not have to travel this far. Huey and BLM spokesman Doug Stockdale said the agency has received no inquiries from buyers.

"I don't expect the boom we had last year at all," Huey said.