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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 13, 2015 - 3 p.m.

Sockeye Fire investigation complete, charges filed

(Palmer, AK) – Two Anchorage residents are facing multiple charges in relation to the start of the Sockeye Fire north of Willow last month that destroyed 55 homes and damaged 44 other structures.

Following an investigation by the Alaska Division of Forestry and Alaska State Fire Marshal's Office, charges were filed in Palmer District Court on Monday against Greg Imig, 59, and Amy Dewitt, 42, for their role in starting the 7,220-acre wildfire on June 14.

State forestry fire investigators determined the cause of the fire to be an illegal, escaped debris burn pile located in forested lands at a recreational cabin owned by Imig. Both Imig and Dewitt are facing a variety of charges that include three counts of reckless endangerment, criminally negligent burning, failure to obtain a burn permit, burning without clearing an area, allowing the spread of fire and leaving a fire unattended.

According to an affidavit filed in court, Imig and Dewitt did not have a required permit for the burn and did not adhere to the safe burning practices that are listed on the permit. The area around the debris pile was not cleared down to mineral soil, there was not a hose or adequate water source to prevent the fire from spreading into the wildlands and the fire was left unattended.

During the course of the investigation, it was determined that Imig and Dewitt burned brush piles at their cabin near 77 Mile Parks Highway and did not extinguish the piles before leaving them unattended on the evening of June 13. The burn piles were located on the edge of and in direct contact with forested land, with no evidence of a fire break to prevent the spread of the fire from the burn piles. One of the piles continued to smolder and then crept out of the hot ash into the woods, resulting in a wildfire the next day.

The devastation caused by the Sockeye Fire illustrates why the Division of Forestry stresses the importance of safe burning practices as part of its burn permit program. Residents and visitors in Alaska need to be aware that they are responsible for any fire they start and can be held accountable for suppression and damage costs.

The reckless endangerment and negligent burning charges are class A misdemeanors punishable by up to a year in jail and a \$10,000 fine while the other charges are lesser misdemeanors punishable by up to six months in jail and a fine up to \$500. In addition, individuals responsible for starting a wildfire can be held accountable for up to two times the cost of fighting the fire. At last report, the suppression costs related to the Sockeye Fire were over \$8 million.

An arraignment for Imig and Dewitt is scheduled at 8:30 a.m. on July 28 in Palmer District Court.

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