Honors Institute students test life as arctic field scientists

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Six students from the Rural Alaska Honors Institute are to participate in an arctic research project in late July, hosted by scientists from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the National Science Foundation's Arctic Systems Science thermokarst project.

"We want to expose high school students to different types of ongoing biology and wildlife research and to inspire them to pursue careers in science," said Kimberley Maher, a UAF research assistant and a coordinator for the trip to the Arctic Biology Toolik Field Station. "RAHI has a great reputation for working with high school students and Toolik Field Station is a perfect venue."

The group includes Carlton and Kendrick Hautala, twins from Kwethluk; Kristen Foster, Noatak; Megan Russell, Sand Point; Marissa Mills, Palmer, and Darien Southall, Unalakleet. The six were chosen for their interest in science and willingness to camp for a week without a shower, Maher said.

They will have an opportunity to hear, see, feel and smell what it's like to do research in the field. "I understand things best when I'm outside, actively learning- not sitting in a chair," said Maher, who is also an outreach coordinator for the thermokarst project.

The students, supplied with an ample amount of bug repellent, will spend a day exploring tundra landscapes that have collapsed and formed slumps and huge open holes, called thermokarsts, as the result of thawing permafrost. They will learn how scientists determine the age of thermokarsts, how to drill deep soil cores into permafrost, how to identify and describe the plants affected by the slumping soils and what these activities tell scientists about a changing arctic landscape.

Another day will be spent along the Kuparuk River helping scientists collect and sort aquatic insects called macroinvertebrates. They will learn about watershed and witness how the river and the surrounding tundra interact.

The students are also to attend the weekly science lecture at Toolik Field Station where they can mingle with scientists and students from around the world.

Alaska Newspapers Staff can be reached at editor@alaskanewspapers.com, or by phone at 907-348-2449