

Closer to Communities

Federal, provincial and territorial forestry ministers have agreed on a united effort to seek out over \$500 million over the next five years to address future losses of life, property and ecosystems to wildfires.

In the first cross-Canada review of forest fires since 1924, the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers (CCFM) has produced a document called The Canadian Wild Land Fire Strategy. In a release on the program the council said, “our vulnerability has reached an unprecedented level and will continue to grow for a variety of reasons, including more frequent and intense fires resulting from climate change, insect infestations that leave dead, highly flammable trees in their wake, and the rising numbers of homes, cottages and businesses being built near flammable forest.”

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Tim Sheldan, Assistant Deputy Minister of the British Columbia Ministry of Forests and Range says that the gap is growing between what must be done to manage forest fires effectively and our ability to do it. According to council data, more than 700,000 people and over 250 communities, many of which are inhabited by Canada’s Aboriginal people, have been threatened by wild fires in the past ten years.

Canada has over four hundred million hectares of forests and other wooded land which constitutes 10 per cent of the world’s forests. This large Canadian forest base cleanses 20 per cent of the world’s fresh water and contains over 140,000 species of plants, animals and micro-organisms. About 93 per cent of forest land in Canada is publicly-owned.

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The forests play a significant role in Canada’s economy. The forest industry is an \$82 billion business sector and employs more than 375,000 people. Over 300 communities depend directly on the forest for their livelihood. Because of this, the provincial and federal governments collectively spend half a billion dollars a year on wild land fire management activities.

Forest fires have been a dominant natural disturbance in Canada since the last ice age. As a result many tree species such as pine, spruce, birch and aspen have adapted to fire and to a large extent rely on fire for their continued existence. Managing wild land fires in order to have the right amount and the right type of fires in the forests at the right time is a complex challenge. According to the strategy however, no matter how difficult, “it is essential to having healthy ecosystems and maintaining biodiversity.” In an extreme fire year in Canada, the area burned would be of an equivalent size to the country of Ireland.

According to the strategy document, climate change research suggests that fire activity in Canada could double in the next 25 years. The risk is also increasing because of the growing number of homes and cottages being built among flammable vegetation in areas that are known as *the wild land–urban interface*. At the same time the CCFM has determined that the ability to manage wild land fire is declining because of the retirements of fire fighting professionals as well as aging equipment and facilities.



NOEL HENDRICKSON

NATURE RULES

According to data, about 97 per cent of wild land fires in Canada are contained in less than 200 hectares but the remaining 3 per cent often burn under the most extreme conditions and “are at times unstoppable.”

As part of the strategy, there will be a stepped up recruitment and training program to create the next generation of professional fire management staff, including capacity building in the Aboriginal and rural communities. A major public awareness campaign is also in the works.

About the Cover

Forest Fires are part of the timeless renewal cycle in nature. Out of the ashes, new growth pushes through and the cycle begins again.

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