

Response to the 2016 Horse River (Fort McMurray) MNP Wildfire Review

Alberta Agriculture and Forestry

Background

- **Scope of the report:**
 - The review looks at Agriculture and Forestry's wildfire preparation and readiness up to May 31, 2016, and the ministry's steps taken to respond to the Horse River wildfire.
 - The review involved extensive consultations with emergency responders, partners and other levels of government in to assess the Government of Alberta's performance and identify areas for improvement.

Horse River Wildfire Review

Summary of Findings

- The report has 10 recommendations for improvement focused on wildfire prevention, planning and preparedness, incident management and policy and procedures.
- The findings include:
 - Agriculture and Forestry was prepared and responded appropriately to the wildfire
 - The fire weather forecasting and wildfire science capabilities of the ministry supported effective decision-making and planning
 - The Horse River Wildfire was an extreme event and more intense wildfires are inevitable and are becoming increasingly more likely

Recommendation 1

Be fully prepared to respond to wildfires the week after snow disappears or May 1 annually

Action: (completed)

- For the past six years, the fire season has started one month earlier than the legislated April 1 start date, on March 1. This allows firefighters additional time to train and be prepared for wildfire activity. It also allows the department to start tracking fire permits earlier in the year.
- In December 2016, legislation was passed to make March 1 the permanent start to fire season.
- Agriculture and Forestry will continue to re-evaluate activation dates for firefighters and aircraft and will may bring them on early, if needed.

Recommendation 2

Improve fire weather forecast products

Action: (completed)

- Five-day or longer wildfire-related weather forecasts are being provided by wildfire meteorologists instead of the previous one-to-three-day weather forecasts.
- Wildfire meteorologists are working closer with wildfire experts to enhance their understanding of the specifics of how current and predicted weather will affect wildfires.

Recommendation 3

Enhance and expand the Planning Section in the Alberta Wildfire Coordination Centre

Action: (in progress)

- Wildfire planning experts are now operational on March 1, and provide daily fire behaviour and wildfire predictions to wildfire managers, which will help decision making.

Recommendation 4

Assign a senior Incident Commander immediately on wildland-urban interface wildfires

Action: (in progress)

- Developing a process to automatically assign experienced incident commanders to complex wildfires near communities that require a response from both urban and wildland firefighters.

Recommendation 5

Implement the airspace management model developed in Fort McMurray

Action: (completed)

- During the wildfire, a model was enhanced that increased efficiency and communications between aircraft fighting the wildfire.
- This process has been formalized for future wildfires.

Recommendation 6

Continue to develop wildfire risk management frameworks

Action: (in progress)

- Wildfire experts are reviewing the list of five provincial priorities for wildfire management (human life, communities, watersheds and sensitive soils, natural resources, infrastructure) to determine if adjustments need to be made in how more priorities should be applied to individual wildfires.

Recommendation 7

Direct agencies and services to utilize the Incident Command System when responding to wildfires

Action: (in progress)

- Agriculture and Forestry is working with other agencies and services to consistently use the Incident Command System (ICS) when dealing with wildfire emergencies.
 - ICS has become the standard model across the world for how agencies should respond to events like natural disasters.

Recommendation 8

Develop a long-term vision for the provincial FireSmart program

Action: (in progress)

- The FireSmart program is used across Canada to help reduce the risk of wildfire to homes and communities.
- A long-term vision for the FireSmart program and its use in forested communities is being developed to help minimize the impacts of wildfires.
 - The FireSmart program is used across Canada to help reduce the risk of wildfire to homes and communities.
- Multi-agency collaboration and an outcome-based approach will be used to implement FireSmart projects.
- The FireSmart program will receive \$45-million over the next three years, which includes \$10.5 million for fire prevention work in the Fort McMurray area.

Recommendation 9

Establish a joint Wildfire Planning Task Team involving stakeholders

Action: (in progress)

- The task team will be made up of municipal and wildland firefighting experts and will include forestry stakeholders.
- Their goals will be to:
 - Establish processes for communications between the government and industry during wildfires
 - Help government utilize industrial equipment, if needed, during a wildfire
 - Help industrial groups understand the potential wildfire hazards near their facilities and develop wildfire mitigation practices.

Recommendation 10

Implement a landscape wildfire management plan tailored for Alberta's northeast region

Action: (in progress)

- A draft has been developed for review.
- This comprehensive planning process will give wildfire experts readily available information to help in decision making during wildfire events.