

PRESS RELEASE

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Ahead of the flames: preparing Canadian homes and communities to limit the growing risk of wildfire

In 2023, Canada experienced a wildfire season of unprecedented scale, shattering the previous record set in 1995 by twofold, and contributing to insurable losses estimated to exceed \$3 billion (according to CatIQ). Fires burned 18.5 million hectares — three times the size of Nova Scotia, and eight times greater than the average annual area burned over the past 25 years. Smoke and flames triggered the evacuation of 200,000 residents and ignited nation-wide calls for large-scale investment in preventative action to create wildfire-ready homes and communities.

[A new report](#), by the University of Waterloo's [Intact Centre on Climate Adaptation](#), offers practical guidance to help Canadians living in forested and grassland regions to follow well-tested actions that can reduce the risk of their home burning by up to 75 per cent.

The report consolidates two plain language, image-based infographics, designed to accelerate implementation of practical actions.

[Three Steps to a Cost-Effective FireSmart™ Home](#) is a step-wise guide to upgrade homes to resist wildfire. Initiatives can include storing wood away from the house and removing shrubs and other flammable material abutting the foundation. More complex initiatives include installing Class A fire-rated roofing made from asphalt, cement fibre or metal, which can limit the potential for embers to ignite a roof.

[Three Features of a Wildfire-Ready Community](#) provides guidance to limit risk beyond the home, such as removing tree branches close to power lines, incorporating fire breaks into community design, completing annual emergency training exercises, and ensuring adequate water supply for firefighting.

Sixty per cent of Canadian communities are vulnerable to wildfire due to their proximity to forests and grasslands. Wildfire risk in these communities is escalating due to expanding urban and industrial development, lack of nationally accepted building standards to safeguard against wildfire, the accumulation of flammable vegetation adjacent to structures, and an increase in the fuel surrounding communities as a consequence of 100 years of fire suppression. These factors are further exacerbated by climate change.

“Climate change is lengthening the wildfire season, contributing to larger, more destructive wildfires, and impacting areas across Canada that historically were not regarded as wildfire-prone, such as the Halifax-area wildfire that destroyed over 200 buildings in 2023,” explained study co-author Cheryl Evans, Director, Flood and Wildfire Resilience, Intact Centre.

The report presents a user-friendly synthesis of best practice guidance developed primarily by the National Research Council of Canada, and FireSmart™ Canada, a national program operated by the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre that has been helping communities improve wildfire resilience for 30 years.

“Wildfire is a fact of life in Canada,” said Dr. Mike Flannigan, BC Innovation Research Chair, Fire Science, Thompson Rivers University. “This report helps to translate climate change and wildfire research into practical guidance that residents and community leaders can apply to learn to live with wildfire.”

Living with wildfire can be site-specific. As Simon Massé, Risk Mitigation Coordinator, SOPFEU, explains, “there is no one-size-fits-all solution to help residents and communities address their unique wildfire risks. This report helps to raise awareness about the variety of tools that are available.”

Michael Norton, Director General, Northern Forestry, Natural Resources Canada, highlights that the report “provides concise, user-friendly guidance that fosters participation, raises awareness, and supports on the ground action from the whole-of-society to strengthen home and community wildfire resilience.”

The report will help Canada meet the targets set out in its new (2023), and first, National Adaptation Strategy, notably: “Communities, including northern and Indigenous communities, in zones of high risk, as identified by provinces and territories, develop wildfire community prevention and mitigation plans by 2030, with up to 15 per cent implemented by 2028”.

Canada’s need to prepare for the growing risk of wildfire cannot be overstated, as Fire Chief Jason Brolund, who was on the front lines of West Kelowna’s 2023 fire season emphasizes: “I look forward to sharing this report to help folks in my community understand the many practical ways we can put boots on the ground today to help reduce West Kelowna’s future wildfire risk”.

As emphasized during the COP 28 talks, Canadians living in forested and grassland regions do not have to be victims of circumstance relative to wildfire risk— by preparing wildfire-ready homes and communities today, Canadians can minimize the financial and social burden of hotter and drier wildfire seasons tomorrow.

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