

Wildfires – the good, the bad, and the prepared

For communities across the Basin-Boundary wildfires are a fact of life, something we deal with every year. Nearly everyone has a story to share when it comes to wildfire, from tragedies to near misses to heroic actions. When it comes to wildfire preparation Community Wildfire Protection Plans have been prepared for many of our communities. These plans include an assessment of the forest immediately surrounding the communities, as well as mitigation measures. High risk areas around our communities have been mapped, but while there are options to reduce the risks, many communities struggle to implement the necessary actions due to lack of resources and capacity.



Wildfires are far reaching in their impacts, including: loss of life, buildings, land, and habitat; health impacts (e.g., air and water quality); and economic impacts (e.g., disruption of transportation and events, work stoppages, government spending). The Rock Creek fire of 2015 is one example of how broad the impacts of wildfire can be. Thousands of hectares of land were burned and many homes and buildings destroyed. The local economy suffered as well, from a drop in tourism and cancellation of events such as the Ponderosa Music Festival. Kris Hargrave, one of Ponderosa's organizers who is originally from Rock Creek, recalls the difficult decision to cancel the 2015 festival – what would have been the fledgling festival's 3rd year. The organizers faced multiple costs they were unable to re-coup, while local businesses went from expecting a spike in profits to experiencing a dramatic dip. Happily, the festival returned to Rock Creek this year (August 19-21) and worked to strengthen ties with the community, from Hargrave's personal efforts working with habitat for humanity to festival shuttles set up to take people from the fairgrounds into Rock Creek to visit the community and local businesses.

Each year the State of the Basin Report collects data on the number of fires and area burned by wildfires. So far the Southeast Fire Centre, which covers the Basin-Boundary region, has reported 155 fires that have burned 450 hectares in the region. This is below the five year average in large part as a result of periodic precipitation throughout the summer that has helped keep the fire danger low. The Fire Centre serves three primary roles. 1 – fire suppression and emergency response support; 2 – training and project work; and 3 – lending support to other regions. So far in 2016, Southeast Fire Crews have been able to lend support to Prince George Fire Centre and Alberta (Alberta Agriculture and Forestry to assist with the wildfire that occurred in Fort McMurray), as well as work on necessary fuel management projects and project work in provincial parks (e.g., trail maintenance). Public education is another part of their job. Karlie Shaughnessy, Communications Specialist with the Southeast Fire Centre, emphasises that when it comes to wildfires *“Not all fire is bad. Fire is an integral part of a health ecosystem and too much fire suppression can negatively impact forest health, leading to infestations (e.g., pine beetle) or large, out-of-control fires”*. There is a difference between careless, human caused fires and naturally caused fires that are allowed to burn in a controlled manner. Sixty-eight percent of the fires this year were caused by lightning, with all other fires caused

by people. Last year's fire in Rock Creek is suspected to be human caused as well, emphasizing **the need for people to be far more careful.**

Learn more about wildfires in our region by [exploring wildfire history](#) on the Digital Basin.

Photo credit: BC Wildfire Service

Resources

- BC Wildfire Status: <http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status>
- Community Wildfire Protection Plan: <https://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/communities/cwpp.shtml>
- Fire bans and restrictions: <http://bcfireinfo.for.gov.bc.ca/hprScripts/WildfireNews/DisplayBan.asp?ID=469#OpenFireBans>
- Southeast Fire Centre: <http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/forestry/managing-our-forest-resources/wildfire-management/wildfire-response/fire-centres#southeast>
- Wildfire prevention: <http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status/wildfire-prevention>



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