

# **Agriculture and Forestry**

## **2016 Horse River (Fort McMurray) Wildfire Review**

# 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 fight the Horse River wildfire.
- The review involved extensive consultations with emergency responders, partners and other levels of government in order 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: (complete)**

- For the past six years, the fire season has started a 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 designate March 1 as the start to fire season.
- Agriculture and Forestry will continue to re-evaluate the activation dates for firefighters and aircraft and will bring them on early, if needed.

# Recommendation 2

## Improve fire weather forecast products

### Action: (complete)

- 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 and wildfire experts are working together to enhance their understanding of how current and predicted weather will affect wildfires.

# Recommendation 3

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

### Action: (complete)

- Wildfire planning experts are scheduled to provide support to wildfire operations effective March 1 each year.
  - These experts support decision making by providing wildfire predictions and tracking information such as daily fire behaviour and resource availability.

# Recommendation 4

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

**Action: (in progress)**

- Enhancing the process to automatically assign the appropriate incident commander and associated support resources to complex wildfires near communities that require a response from both urban and wildland firefighters.

# Recommendation 5

## Develop enhanced airspace management procedures

### Action: (complete)

- During the Horse River wildfire, Agriculture and Forestry's airspace management procedures were implemented and adapted for the wildfire.
- These procedures will be utilized on future wildfire events.



# 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 each priority should be applied to individual wildfires.

# Recommendation 7

**Direct agencies and services to utilize the Incident Command System (ICS - Canada) when responding to Wildland Urban Interface wildfires**

## **Action: (in progress)**

- Agriculture and Forestry is supporting the work of Alberta Emergency Management Agency to establish standard processes for agencies and services to consistently use ICS Canada when dealing with Wildland Urban Interface wildfires.
  - 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)

- Jurisdictions across Canada implement FireSmart 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.
- 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 forest industry stakeholders (e.g., forestry, oil and gas, utility).
- 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 (e.g., hazardous fuel identification, and identify at-risk infrastructure, etc.) to support decision making during wildfire events.