



February 11, 2009
For immediate release

Can it happen here?
Preventing a catastrophic wildfire in Canada

Marysville is no more. The town of 800 people was destroyed by wildfire over the weekend, the deadliest fire in Australian history. The recent trend of large, uncontrolled fires includes unprecedented damage in the United States, Australia and a number of other countries. Will Canada be next? Are we prepared for the risk of a catastrophic wildland fire?

Leading fire experts from Canada, the United States and Australia recently met to assess the challenges facing wildland fire management agencies. The Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction hosted the 'Toronto summit'. We explored the changing face of wildland fire, and the growing risk of large, uncontrolled fire events.

Fire is essential to maintain healthy forests and wildland ecosystems. Indeed, the expert community believes that most areas need more small, controlled fires to remove the dangerous build-up of fuels that increases the risk that fires grow out of control.

However, the public expects the immediate suppression of urban fires, and often assumes that this is also the best way to manage wildland fires. Many, for example, oppose prescribed burns, fires set by public officials with the intention of reducing the risk of large, uncontrolled fire by eliminating underbrush, blow down and forest litter.

Wildfire experts seek to establish a new mind-set with greater public awareness of fire risks and benefits.

Canada, the United States and Australia have similar approaches to wildland fire management. Until a few years ago this resulted in little loss of life and only

Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction
20 Richmond Street East, Suite 210, Toronto, Canada M5C 2W7
Tel: (416) 364-8677 Email: info@iclr.org Fax: (416) 364-5889

moderate property damage. The vast majority of wildland fires – about 97 percent in Canada – have historically been contained to less than 200 hectares.

But this has changed. California and Australia were among the first to experience more fires that grew out of control. People are dead. Towns have been lost. Thousands of homes are gone, with several fire losses exceeding a billion dollars.

A number of factors, including global warming, have increased the presence of disease, insects and drought. This has increased the frequency and potential severity of large wildland fires.

In addition, more people and property are located in areas where wildfires may strike. Indeed, one study estimates that more than 30 percent of the United States' population now lives in the wildland-urban interface. Where we choose to live and play is increasing the risk that fires will result in fatalities, injuries and destruction of property.

The remarkable effort of our courageous firefighters has limited the losses that Canadians have experienced to date, yet fire experts are concerned about the quality and quantity of equipment available to support this important effort.

Large recent fire losses in California, Australia and, to a lesser extent, British Columbia, brought public attention, political direction and increased funding for fire agencies. Nevertheless, significant funding for wildfire management in the United States and Australia is not yet accompanied by a well-defined, national wildland fire strategy.

In contrast, Canada has an excellent national strategy but it is yet to make the long-term investment required to realize our established objectives. In 2005, the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers issued a wildland fire strategy with a bold vision to make Canada's approach to wildland fire management "among the most progressive in the world."

Canada's strategy is built around three core elements: resilient communities and an empowered public; healthy and productive forest ecosystems; and, modern business practices. International experts agree that these are the essential elements that must be addressed. The vision is sound, yet we remain vulnerable.

To help Canadians build resilient communities we have *FireSmart*, a program with specific risk management advice for property owners and community leaders. It was developed by *Partners in Protection* and endorsed by all the major governments in Canada. *FireSmart* has been tested and proven, and now

Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction
20 Richmond Street East, Suite 210, Toronto, Canada M5C 2W7
Tel: (416) 364-8677 Email: info@iclr.org Fax: (416) 364-5889

requires sufficient funding to come into effect in communities at risk across the country.

FireSmart needs support from a social marketing campaign to encourage property owners and community leaders to embrace their responsibility. Managing the risk of large fires should be a shared responsibility that includes fire agencies and property owners. This would include education about the risks and benefits of fire.

We also need healthy forests to prevent uncontrolled fire. The mountain pine beetle, spruce budworm, poor forest management, and prolonged periods of drought add to the risk of large fire. These perils need to be confronted within a comprehensive and appropriately funded plan.

Most importantly, our brave firefighters require the appropriate modern tools and equipment so they can confidently protect us. Funds are urgently needed to replace obsolete equipment. The Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre has been a remarkable success in sharing people and equipment across the country, and demonstrates the capacity for co-operation between the federal, provincial and territorial governments. However, the current equipment urgently needs renewal.

Canada is vulnerable to the risk of a large, uncontrolled wildland fire. Horrific fire deaths in Australia and property damage in California are warnings that action is needed now. Canada has a wildland fire strategy that sets out our shared vision for how we can prepare for the growing risk of catastrophic fires. It is important that we fund and aggressively implement the strategy. Working together we can prevent fires from becoming disasters.

- 30 -

For more information, contact Glenn McGillivray, Managing Director, ICLR at (416) 364-8677 or gmcgillivray@iclr.org

or

Brian Stocks, B.J. Stocks Wildfire Investigations Ltd., (705) 759-1201 or brianstocks@sympatico.ca

Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction
20 Richmond Street East, Suite 210, Toronto, Canada M5C 2W7
Tel: (416) 364-8677 Email: info@iclr.org Fax: (416) 364-5889