

# Catching Like Wildfire

Preventing a catastrophic wildfire requires money and a plan. In Canada we are only halfway there.

## QUIETEST WILDFIRE SEASON

In 27 years of wildfire monitoring, 2008 ranked 4th in terms of the lowest number of fires reported. The only province to report an increase (of 12%) was Alberta.

**M**arysville is no more. The Australian town of 800 people was destroyed by fires in early February—with 200 listed as dead this series of wildfires is now considered the deadliest in Australian history.

Insured losses will likely exceed \$421 million (CAD) and total damage, including infrastructure, could exceed \$1.7 billion (CAD), according to Standard & Poor's—and with embers still burning these costs are likely to rise.

In the last five years, uncontrollable fires have left a wake of damage not only in Australia, but throughout the U.S., Greece, Portugal, and even in certain parts of Canada.

Early last year, leading fire experts from Canada, U.S. and Australia were brought together by the Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction (ICLR) at a Toronto-based summit

to explore the growing risk of large, uncontrollable fires.

These experts maintained that, despite obvious concerns, fire is essential to maintain healthy forests and wildland ecosystems. These experts maintain that most areas need *more* small, controlled fires to remove the dangerous buildup of fuels that increases the risk of uncontrollable fires. The key, for these experts, is maintaining control, rather than eradicating all fire.

However, public sentiment around fire is one of elimination and suppression. Many in the public domain oppose prescribed burns: Fires set by officials with the intention of reducing the risk of large, uncontrolled fire. And many confuse prescribed burns with wildfires.

The vast majority of wildland fires are limited to narrow geographic burn areas—97% of reported fires in Canada are

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## TIPS TO PROTECT CLIENTS FROM WILDFIRES

- Cover attic and sub-floor vents with noncombustible screening (mesh size no greater than 50 mm).
- If building a new home or re-roofing your existing house, use roof material with a 'Class A' fire-resistive rating.
- Limit the size and number of windows that face large areas of vegetation.
- Install tempered glass or multi-layered glazed panels in exterior walls, glass doors and skylights or install solid exterior shutters.
- Install and maintain smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors.
- Have a fire extinguisher on each level of your home.
- Create a zone of non-combustible material around your house that will slow down a fire and possibly direct it around your home. This includes:
- Remove all dry grass, brush, leaves and dead or dying trees from within at least 30 metres of your home.
- Plant native, fire-resistant vegetation whenever possible.
- Space trees and shrubs at least 3 metres apart.
- Reduce the number of trees in heavily wooded areas.
- For trees taller than 5 metres, prune lower branches within 2 metres of the ground to keep ground fires from spreading into treetops. Shrubs planted under trees should be no more than 45 centimetres high.
- Remove dead branches overhanging your roof, and all branches within 3 metres of chimneys.
- Enclose the underside of balconies and above-ground decks with fire-resistant or noncombustible materials.
- Cover chimneys serving fireplaces with noncombustible screening with a mesh size no greater than 50 millimetres.
- Store firewood at least 15 metres from any structure.
- Clearly mark emergency water sources—which should be insulated and placed 300 metres from your home—and maintain easy access to them.
- Mow your lawn regularly and dispose promptly of cuttings and debris.
- Clear your roof, gutters and eaves of debris.
- Do not connect wooden fencing directly



Information on how to mitigate risks from the Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction (ICLR) to your home.

- Make sure that the street number of your house is clearly visible from the road.
- Become familiar with your community's wildfire management system and that every family member knows what to do if an evacuation notice is issued.
- Learn about disaster safety plans in your workplace and at your children's school and/or childcare centre.

contained in less than 200 hectares of surrounding land. Similar approaches are found in the U.S. and Australia.

But this method of mitigating fire damage changed. The U.S. and Australia began to experience an increase in the number of uncontrollable fires. And the results of this were devastating. People died, homes were levelled, entire towns were lost, and lawsuits were filed. Several of these fires reported losses that exceeded \$1 billion (US). For example, the October 2007 blazes that ripped through California prompted losses in excess of \$2 billion (US), according to A.M. Best.

A number of factors, including climate change, have increased the presence of disease, insects and drought. This has increased the frequency and potential severity of large wildland fires. As such, wildfire experts want to establish a new mindset about wildfires.

Yet, significant funding for wildfire management in the U.S. and Australia is not yet accompanied by a well-defined, national wildland fire strategy.

In contrast, Canada has an excellent national strategy—the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers' Canadian Wildland Fire Strategy (CWFS)—but there is a lack of funding and long-term initiative to realize the CWFS's objectives.

Evidence of the potential for more devastating fires in Canada is clearly demonstrated by the 2003 firestorm that swept through the Okanagan valley in B.C. This fire was the

result of 2,500 wildfires in the interior of the province, with an all-time record high on the reported number of interface fires—where wildland meets urban development. The fires destroyed 334 homes, many businesses and forced the evacuation of 45,000 people. Three pilots died in the line of duty fighting those fires.

The magnitude of losses in Australia and the U.S. have yet to materialize in Canada. Still, there is a disconcerting fact that the conditions that exist in such places as southern California and Marysville, Australia exist in certain parts of Canada—particularly in British Columbia, Northern Ontario, and Northern Quebec.

Several factors are converging to create a perfect storm of sorts, and numerous stakeholders—including disaster managers, first responders, insurers, homeowners, and policymakers—need to quickly appreciate, understand and act in order to prevent potentially disconcerting wildland/urban interface fires in Canada. ☺

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