



Wildfires are a natural part of Canada’s forest ecosystems, playing a vital role in renewal and biodiversity. However, in recent years, their frequency, intensity, and destructiveness have escalated dramatically.

In 2023 alone, wildfires consumed over 16.5 million hectares of land—more than six times the historical average—making it the most devastating fire season in Canadian history. These fires displaced thousands and disrupted critical infrastructure.

Wildfires can ignite from both natural and human sources, but lightning is the dominant cause in Canada, responsible for over 90% of the area

burned in 2023. As the climate warms, lightning strikes are becoming more frequent, and fire seasons are starting earlier, lasting longer, and becoming harder to contain. Warmer temperatures, reduced snowpack, and prolonged drought conditions have created ideal environments for fires to spread rapidly and unpredictably. Even “zombie fires”—blazes that smoulder underground through winter—are now part of Canada’s evolving fire landscape.

Wildfire Mitigation Strategies for Community Organizations

For organizations dedicated to service, education, care, and culture, wildfire resilience is not just about protecting property—it's about safeguarding people, preserving heritage, and ensuring continuity of purpose. Taking proactive steps to mitigate wildfire risk is vital to protecting both people and property.

The following guidance outlines practical steps community organizations can take to reduce wildfire risk. These measures focus on two key areas: property-level mitigation and emergency preparedness, ensuring that both physical assets and people are protected before, during, and after a wildfire event.

GROUNDS AND PROPERTY MAINTENANCE

Vegetation Management: Creating Defensible Space

Defensible space is a buffer zone between a building and surrounding vegetation that reduces the chance of ignition from embers, radiant heat, or direct flame contact.

Recommended Zones:

Zone 1 (0–1.5 metres from the building):

- Keep this area completely free of vegetation.
- Use non-combustible materials like gravel, concrete, or pavers.
- Avoid placing mulch, wood chips, or decorative bark near foundations.

Zone 2 (1.5–10 metres):

- Plant only low-growing, fire-resistant species.
- Space shrubs and trees to prevent canopy overlap.
- Prune lower branches to reduce ladder fuels.

Zone 3 (10–30 metres):

- Thin out dense vegetation.
- Remove deadfall, fallen leaves, and dry grasses regularly.
- Maintain access routes for emergency vehicles.

Debris Control and Fuel Storage

Even well-maintained landscaping can be compromised by overlooked fuel sources. The following debris and material management practices should be followed:

Wood Storage:

- ✓ Store firewood, lumber, and construction materials at least 10 metres away from buildings.
- ✓ Elevate wood piles off the ground and cover them with fire-resistant tarps.
- ✓ Avoid stacking wood under decks, porches, or eaves.

Waste and Recycling Bins:

- ✓ Use metal or fire-resistant containers with tight-fitting lids.
- ✓ Keep bins away from structures and vegetation.
- ✓ Empty regularly, especially during fire season.

Outdoor Furniture and Decor:

- ✓ Choose metal, stone, or fire-resistant composite materials.
- ✓ Avoid plastic or untreated wood near buildings.
- ✓ Secure lightweight items that could become ember carriers.

Seasonal Cleanups:

- ✓ Schedule spring and fall cleanup days to remove dead vegetation, pine needles, and leaf litter.
- ✓ Clear debris from fences, sheds, and outdoor gathering spaces.

Building Hardening

The materials and design of commercial buildings play a critical role in fire resistance. Consider the following upgrades:

- ✓ Exterior Materials: Use non-combustible siding, roofing, and decking. Metal, concrete, and fire-rated composites offer superior protection.

Building Resilience and Infrastructure Planning

Incorporating fire-safe design and infrastructure is essential, especially for older buildings or those in rural settings. Drawing from land development principle, organizations should:

Access and Egress:

- ✓ Ensure driveways and access roads are wide enough for emergency vehicles and kept clear of obstructions.
- ✓ Provide multiple exit routes to prevent entrapment during evacuations.
- ✓ Clearly mark building addresses with reflective signage visible from the road.

- ✓ Ventilation Protection: Install ember-resistant vents and screens to prevent firebrands from entering attics or crawl spaces.
- ✓ Windows and Doors: Opt for tempered glass and metal-framed doors. Ensure seals are tight to block heat and smoke intrusion.

Water Supply and Firefighting Access:

- ✓ Verify that hydrants, cisterns, or ponds are accessible and functional.
- ✓ Maintain clear pathways to water sources for fire crews.
- ✓ Consider installing external sprinkler systems or rooftop sprinklers for added protection.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND BUSINESS CONTINUITY

Wildfires can escalate rapidly, leaving little time to react. A well-developed plan ensures safety during a crisis and enables faster recovery afterward.

Emergency Preparedness: Protecting People and Property

Evacuation Planning

- ✓ Develop clear, site-specific evacuation procedures for staff, volunteers, residents, and visitors.
- ✓ Identify multiple exit routes and designate assembly points away from fire-prone areas.
- ✓ Ensure transportation is available for individuals with mobility challenges.
- ✓ Post evacuation maps and instructions in common areas and include them in staff onboarding materials.

Communication Protocols

- ✓ Establish a chain of command and assign roles for emergency response.
- ✓ Use mass notification systems (email, SMS, PA systems) to alert stakeholders quickly.

- ✓ Maintain updated contact lists for staff, emergency services, and local partners.
- ✓ Monitor local fire conditions through trusted sources and be prepared to act on short notice.

On-Site Safety Measures

- ✓ Keep fire extinguishers, first aid kits, and emergency supplies accessible and regularly inspected.
- ✓ Install smoke detectors and fire alarms with battery backups.
- ✓ Ensure water sources (hydrants, tanks, sprinklers) are functional and accessible to fire crews.
- ✓ Train staff in fire safety, evacuation procedures, and assisting vulnerable individuals.

Business Continuity: Preserving Mission and Operations

Continuity Planning

- ✓ Identify critical functions and develop contingency plans for each.
- ✓ Establish remote work or alternate facility options where feasible.
- ✓ Prioritize restoration of services that directly impact community well-being.

Data and Records Protection

- ✓ Digitize important documents, donor databases, financial records, and historical archives.
- ✓ Store backups off-site or in secure cloud environments.

Community Collaboration

Wildfire resilience is a shared responsibility. Organizations can strengthen their impact by working together:

- ✓ Local Partnerships: Coordinate with municipal fire departments, emergency services, and neighbouring institutions.

- ✓ Support Regional Initiatives: Participate in fuel reduction programs, firebreak maintenance, and public education campaigns.

CONCLUSION

Wildfires may be inevitable, but their impact doesn't have to be. Every measure from clearing vegetation, safeguarding buildings, training staff, and coordinating with neighbours, contributes to a safer, more resilient community. With preparation and partnership, organizations can protect not only their property, but also the people and purposes at the heart of their mission.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

FireSmart Canada

<https://firesmartcanada.ca>

NFPA 1140: Standard for Wildland Fire Protection

<https://www.nfpa.org>

Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre (CIFFC)

<https://ciffc.ca>

Natural Resources Canada – Canadian Wildland Fire Information System

<https://cwfis.cfs.nrcan.gc.ca>

Public Safety Canada – Emergency Management Framework

<https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca>

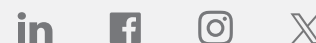
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