



Saskatchewan's Wildfire Management Strategies



Saskatchewan
Environment

Saskatchewan's Wildfire Management Principles and Strategies

Department Mandate

The mandate of the Department is to protect and manage Saskatchewan's environment and natural resources so as to maintain a high level of environmental quality, ensure sustainable development, and provide economic and social benefits for present and future generations.

Saskatchewan Environment Fire Management and Forest Protection Branch supports the department's mandate by developing and implementing programs to manage wildfire.



Fire and Forest Insect and Disease Management Policy Framework History

The 1995 forest fire season was extremely difficult in Saskatchewan. Smoke and flames caused 16 evacuations forcing more than 2,000 people from their homes. More than 20 highways were closed, power lines were disrupted, large tracts of valuable commercial forest burned, fire bans were common and property loss was substantial. Internal and external reviews of the province's fire program recommended a number of changes to improve the way fire crews responded to wildfires in Saskatchewan. Most of these changes were implemented by the following year. However, the reviews also indicated that the province's old fire management policy needed to be updated.

From 1998 to 2002, a new Fire and Forest Insect and Disease Management Policy Framework was developed. During two rounds of province-wide public consultations, people from across the province had the opportunity to express their opinions about what the new policy framework should include. The Fire and Forest Insect and Disease Management Policy Framework was approved in March 2003.

Principles

The principles for developing new wildfire management strategies for the province are consistent with the Fire and Forest Insect and Disease Management Policy Framework consultations. These principles include: making an assessment of all fire management considerations before taking action; choosing a response that will minimize negative economic impact; and ensuring suppression costs are proportionate to the values being protected.

In order of importance, protection priorities used to develop our wildfire management strategies are human life, communities, commercial forest. And major public infrastructures. Beyond these general priorities and based on values at risk, the province is committed to:

- preparedness levels tied to fire hazards;
- early detection of wildfires;
- rapid assessment and response; and
- working together with local fire departments for mutual aid benefits.

These principles allow for the flexible decision-making needed in fire management.



**Be prepared...
don't let your
fire go wild.**

Saskatchewan Environment believes that healthy, vibrant forests that are naturally renewed by fire or through forest harvest that mimics natural fire, are in the best interest of northern residents, businesses and the province.

Our management strategies direct the province's wildfire suppression responses. Many factors are considered when deciding what actions to take on wildfires. These include: lives at risk; what zone the fire is in; the chances of success; potential costs; the value of what is threatened; the time of year; current weather forecasts; whether the area will benefit ecologically and how much danger there will be to fire crews.



Our Wildfire Management Strategies

The objectives of our management strategies are: to continue to protect the things that are most important to people; to allow fire to play a more natural and beneficial role on the landscape and; to reduce the chance of the extreme costs that have become common in fire management jurisdictions all over North America and around the world.



Community Full Response Zones:

Under Saskatchewan's fire management strategies, communities are afforded the highest level of protection. Within 20 kilometres of communities all fires that pose a threat are managed with the intent of extinguishing them in order to relieve the danger they pose to communities.



High Value Commercial Forest Full Response Zones

During the consultations for the new policy framework, people also told the department that forest industry jobs were very important to them. Therefore, 'full response zones' have been established in areas with current high value commercial timber. In these areas all fires are put out or controlled. Ongoing consideration is given to ensure the cost of fighting fires is warranted, given the value of what is threatened.



Modified Response Zones

Modified Response Zones have been designated in southern portions of the Northern Provincial Forest. 'Modified response zones' are areas where there are fewer values that would be threatened by a wildfire and that might benefit ecologically from fire. In these areas consideration is given to fighting fires, based on an assessment of the values threatened. When efforts to suppress fires in 'modified response zones' are unsuccessful, fire management staff will concentrate on protecting 'full response zones' in the area.



Observation Zone

Excluding communities and major infrastructures such as mines, the far northern portion of the Northern Provincial Forest is called the 'observation zone'. In this area, there are fewer human values or commercial timber and fire is generally allowed to play its natural, beneficial role on the landscape. Intervention is considered on the basis of suppression costs, compared with the value of what is being protected.



What's Good About Wildfire?

In the last half of the 20th century, people generally did not recognize the benefits of wildfire on the landscape and tried to eliminate it. But trying to put all fires out only resulted in forests where the trees became old, diseased and more likely to burn. That is because wildfire is a natural part of forests and grasslands in Saskatchewan. It is the main shaper of the boreal forest, setting the stage for new growth and forest renewal. In fact, large and frequent fires have always burned in the province's boreal forests and most plants and animals in the forest are well adapted to it.

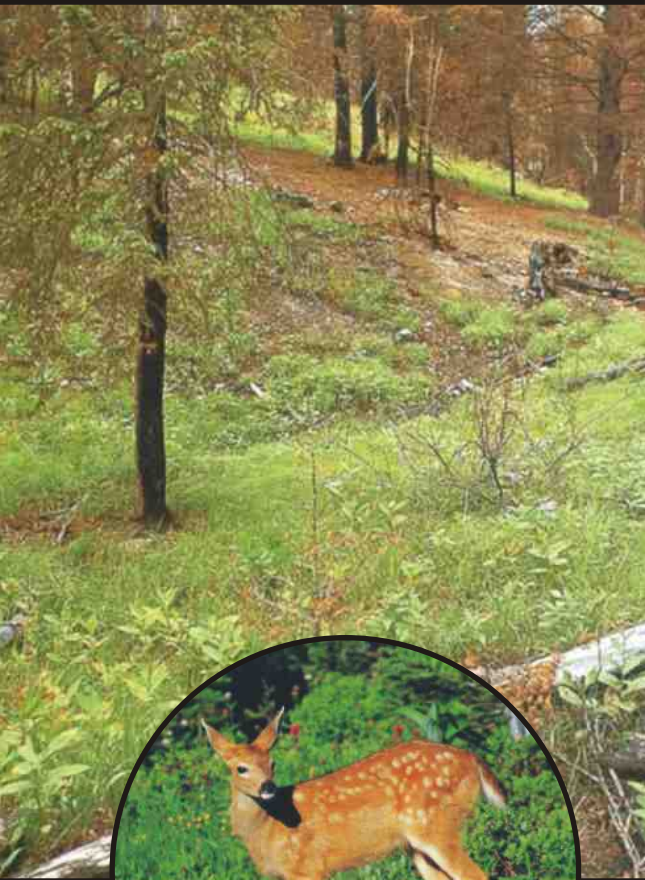
Jack pine cones require the heat of wildfires to open them and release their seeds. Aspen shoots quickly emerge from the roots of trees when the heat of a fire kills the trees. These adaptations evolved over thousands of years and many other plants and animals have also evolved to live with fire.

Fire also plays an important role in forests by burning away surface material and exposing mineral soil for seeds to take root and releasing nutrients needed by plants to grow. When a mature evergreen forest burns, the birds and other animals that rely on it decrease. However, new grass, broad-leafed shrubs and deciduous trees like birch and aspen take over. With all the new greenery, all of the animals that feed on it become more numerous. Increased populations of mice, rabbits, deer, moose and elk appear. Soon predator animals like wolves, coyotes and lynx that feed on them increase. In turn, this abundance of new animal life improves trapping and hunting opportunities.

Saskatchewan's new fire management strategies also recognize the ecological benefits of wildfire in the management of Parks and 'representative areas' within the province's Representative Areas Network. When natural fire does not occur in these and other locations that might ecologically benefit from fire, controlled or 'prescribed' burns may be undertaken by the department.

Although natural fire plays an important role in Saskatchewan's forests, there is no place for unplanned fires caused by people. Every year, people cause hundreds of fires that threaten life, communities, valuable forest resources and property. Saskatchewan Environment has adopted a comprehensive prevention/education program to reduce these fires.

For information on safer burning practices and local fire weather conditions, contact your nearest Saskatchewan Environment Forest Protection Office or visit the department's website at www.se.gov.sk.ca



**Wildfire risks can be substantially reduced.
Be prepared...don't let your fire go wild.**

Protecting Yourself From Wildfire



Because fire is a natural part of the forest, anyone who lives in or near a forest is at risk from wildfire. Under Saskatchewan's Emergency Management Act, individuals and communities are required to protect themselves from the threat of wildfire. Individuals can do Firesmart things like:

- removing evergreen trees within 10 metres of buildings
- pruning the branches of trees three metres up from ground
- choosing less flammable shingles such as asphalt, tin or composite
- having 30 metres of garden hose hooked up to a water supply and some simple fire tools on hand
- Developing and practising an emergency escape plan
- removing surface debris such as branches, dry grass or fallen trees

On the community level, some initiatives that should be undertaken include:

- an assessment of wildfire risks
- fuel breaks as identified in the assessment
- managing the use of fire with by-laws
- purchasing wildfire suppression equipment
- wildfire suppression cross-training for structural firefighters

For more information on Firesmart activities, contact your nearest Saskatchewan Environment Forest Protection Office or visit the department's website at www.se.gov.sk.ca.

Check Out Our Website

For more information on our wildfire strategies, Firesmart activities, or any other fire prevention and education initiatives, please visit the department's website at

www.se.gov.sk.ca

To report a wildfire call Firewatch (toll-free) at **1-800-667-9660**.



Saskatchewan
Environment