

# **Wildfire Review and 2016 Preparations Announcement**

## **MEDIA BACKGROUNDER**

### **2016 WILDFIRE SEASON FORECAST**

- The Ministry of Environment uses weather forecasts and climate models to help anticipate spring wildfire hazards, based on fall moisture conditions, winter precipitation, snow melt and overall conditions in the forest.
- With generally warmer temperatures and below-normal snowfall over much of the northern half of the province so far this winter, the Government of Saskatchewan is preparing for the possibility of an early start to the coming wildfire season.

### **PREPARING FOR AN EARLY WILDFIRE SEASON**

- All preparations are on schedule, including aircraft and equipment maintenance, seasonal staff hiring, contracting of specialized services and staff training.
- The Ministry of Environment will be bringing some aircraft into service sooner than normal and recalling wildfire crews two weeks earlier than usual.
- A CV580A air tanker and a bird dog aircraft are scheduled to be online by March 27.
- Seasonal staff in the Prince Albert Fire Center Area will start April 4, with staff in more northern areas on the job by mid-April.
- Community fuel mitigation projects – initiatives focused on thinning, pruning and removing deadfall and trees that could serve as fire fuel – took place in 15 locations over the winter and will continue into the spring, helping to reduce the risk from future wildfires.

### **ENHANCEMENTS FOR 2016**

- Additional seasonal firefighting crews hired;
- Additional firefighting equipment, including safety equipment, hoses, pumps and sprinklers;
- Upgrades to weather stations in the Ministry of Environment's network;
- Improved capacity for emergency firefighter training and recertification; and
- Upgrades to Wildfire Management's resource tracking and information-sharing system

### **COMMUNITY PROTECTION PRIORITIES**

- Wildfires threatening human life, communities and major infrastructure will continue to receive the ministry's highest priority.
- The ministry will no longer use the 20-kilometre zone as a strategy to prioritize wildfires around communities.
- However, the ministry will continue to assess and manage every wildfire based on threat to communities and other factors including weather forecast, physical environment and previous mitigation efforts, regardless of distance from a community.
- This may increase the number of wildfires the ministry manages each year, depending on the fire season.

## **NORTHERN ENGAGEMENT**

- In the fall, as part of its lessons-learned process, the Government of Saskatchewan held a series of nine meetings across northern Saskatchewan to engage with over 120 local leaders and community officials who were affected by the 2015 wildfires.
- Attendees also included representatives from the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, Prince Albert Grand Council, Meadow Lake Tribal Council, Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation, Lac La Ronge Indian Band, and Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC).
- The province committed to sharing a draft of what was heard with community leaders to ensure it accurately reflects their experiences, concerns and recommendations as expressed at the engagement meetings. This continued engagement is important as we continue to learn from this experience. The province also held an online survey and gathered responses from more than 600 Saskatchewan residents.
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- The province encouraged affected industries and businesses to provide feedback, and received 11 written submissions.

## **EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND PREPAREDNESS**

- In response to the feedback and a review of lessons learned, the province is:
  - Developing a policy to engage municipal fire departments to assist in responding to large-scale emergencies outside their existing local municipal response areas.
  - Compiling a centralized list of emergency management reference material available from various ministries, crowns and agencies.
  - Working with provincial partners and INAC to focus on the evacuation process and to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the province and local authorities.
  - Reviewing current practices used to identify wildfire and smoke threats to a community and to advise local leaders of the options and tools available.
  - Expanding emergency management training for elected leaders and local officials.
  - Expanding the Civil Service Response Team so additional trained personnel can be called to support communities and the province during major events.

## **2015 WILDFIRES**

- In 2015, 720 wildfires burned approximately 1.7 million hectares of forest, impacting more than 50 northern communities, and resulting in the largest emergency response and evacuation of people in the province's history.
- There were no lives lost, no serious injuries and no communities lost to wildfire in 2015.