



PRINCE ALBERT

Collaborating to reduce wildfire risk

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THE SCIENCE

Fire is a natural part of northern Saskatchewan's forested ecosystem, with the province having one of the highest rates of wildfire in Canada. There are over 100 communities in Saskatchewan that are located in or near forests. As more development occurs in the wildland-urban interface, the ability to let fires run their natural course is no longer an option, as the risk to lives and property is high. As a result of climate change, dryer and hotter weather across the prairie provinces, coupled with declines in the health of aging forests and increased fuel loads, is leading to increases in both the intensity and frequency of wildfires. This poses significant challenges in managing wildfire risk in northern Saskatchewan.

With a population of over 35,000 people, the City of Prince Albert is the largest municipality in northern Saskatchewan. A key area of concern for Prince Albert is the Nisbet Provincial Forest, a large old growth forest on both municipal and provincial crown land that borders the city. As a result of its age and health, the Nisbet Forest is increasingly susceptible to wildfires. The risk is exacerbated by migration from the city to rural areas having resulted in homes nestled in the forest, as well as correctional facilities, a landfill, commercial/industrial occupancies, utility and major transportation corridors, a municipal park, and an airport bordering the interface. Due to the proximity of the forest to Prince Albert and the developments in the interface, wildfire preparedness, mitigation, and response are priorities.

THE TRIGGER

In 2002, Prince Albert had a close call with the Crutwell wildfire, which occurred just outside its municipal boundaries. In 2015, hot weather, dry conditions and lightning strikes combined to create one of Saskatchewan's worst fire seasons. Large wildfires affected multiple communities in northern Saskatchewan, forcing the evacuation of 13,000 residents. It was the largest evacuation ever experienced in the province. Although the fire was burning to the northeast of Prince Albert, the city was at the epicenter of the action. Its fire department was mobilized to help protect the community of La Ronge, while the city managed the flood of evacuees needing shelter and support. Most recently, the 2016 Fort McMurray fire raised the profile of wildfire risk and brought to the forefront the need to have a strong strategy in place for wildland fires.

THE APPROACH

Prince Albert is working to reduce wildfire risk in several key ways. These include: increasing planning and collaboration between public sector and private sector partners via the Nisbet Forest Protective Strategies Working Group, managing fuels in the Nisbet Forest; promoting hazard identification and reduction through FireSmart initiatives with the public, seeking approval for a new City bylaw that would require new developments to adhere to the FireSmart principles, improving the city's mass notification system, and improving fire detection methods by monitoring lightning strikes in the area.



Figure 15: At the core of their public engagement strategy, Prince Albert believes that residents and businesses can play a valuable role when it comes to mitigating wildfire risk by adopting FireSmart measures on their properties. (Source: City of Prince Albert)

The City of Prince Albert, along with the Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment (Forest Service and Wildfire Management) and Provincial Emergency Management and Fire Safety, continues its fuel management strategies in the Nisbet Forest to reduce wildfire risk and make wildfires in the interface easier to manage. At the core of their public engagement strategy, Prince Albert believes that residents and businesses can play a valuable role when it comes to mitigating wildfire risk by adopting FireSmart measures on their properties.

THE OUTCOME

To enhance disaster governance in the area, the Nisbet Forest Protective Strategies Working Group was recently formed. It is a multidisciplinary group that is comprised of rural municipalities, wildfire personnel, ministry of environment staff, forest service staff, and key players in emergency management and fire safety for the region. Another interesting partner at the table is the insurance industry, with some local brokers and the Saskatchewan Government Insurance supporting discussion about what can be done to reduce losses. Getting all of the key decision makers to sit around the table and share information has been a challenge in the past. The goal of the working group is to better coordinate efforts and resources to protect the assets in and around the Nisbet Forest against the threat of wildfire. For National Wildfire Community Preparedness day, the City of Prince Albert and the Nisbet Forest Protective Strategies Working Group hosted a community open house and barbecue for residents and businesses in the wildland-urban interface to learn about risk reduction strategies and introduce them to the FireSmart program.

Prince Albert has also adopted a mass notification system in the city, called PA Alert, based on the understanding that if a fire were to start in the Nisbet Forest, time would be of the essence. Emergency responders need more than the traditional communication means and social media to get the word out to at-risk residents and businesses. PA Alert is an all-hazards voluntary program that allowed people to log into the website and add their contact information and the location of any properties of concern. The program allows for notification via both mass messaging and targeted messages to those registered who are deemed to be at risk based on their location.

As 45 percent of forest fires are started by lightning strikes, Prince Albert has also partnered with Ubimet, an international weather service provider, to place one of their lightning detection systems in Prince Albert. The lightning detection system will provide the city with access to lightning data around Prince Albert, allowing for emergency personnel to locate lightning strikes and monitor them with respect to early response to fire, especially in the Nisbet Forest.

Finally, Prince Albert Council is currently considering a proposal to rewrite its zoning bylaw to include a provision that would require an adherence to FireSmart recommendations for new developments.

A WORD FROM PRINCE ALBERT

According to Prince Albert's Fire Chief, Jason Everitt, it is important to address the different stakeholders when it comes to reducing wildfire risk. "It's important to set up partnerships, collaborations and resources. We've looked at wildfire risk reduction from the perspective of the property owner, the municipality, and the province. We have things happening at all 3 levels. We are really driving the homeowner piece of the FireSmart program and we are working with the different communities nestled into the wildland urban interface to educate them of the importance of FireSmart and encourage them to take measures to protect themselves. Residents need to understand the realities of how the building and maintenance of their homes and yards interact with fire risk and how that impacts our ability to do our job."

Chief Everitt emphasized the need to properly understand the risks facing the community. "After Fort McMurray, there was renewed interest in learning about the dynamics associated with wildfires. The majority of property loss in Fort McMurray wasn't a result of direct contact with the fire through radiant heat or conductive means, it was from the embers that were launched. We have a river that separates the City of Prince Albert from the Nisbet Forest. Public belief seems to be that the river will protect the City, but actually it won't. As soon as you recognize risk, you own it. If you ignore the risks, then you lose."