



# PENTICTON

Optimizing operational preparedness  
before a wildfire

*By Sophie Guilbault*

*Source: City of Pentiction*

## THE SCIENCE

Operational preparedness is important when planning for hazards faced by communities, including wildland urban interface fires. Activities that contribute to developing operational capabilities, improving effective disaster response and reducing the vulnerability of community members are important when planning for wildfires. These activities can take various forms, including the development of standard operating procedures for response, training response personnel, and improving access to public information and communications systems.

## THE TRIGGER

Penticton is a municipality of approximately 37,000 people located in the Okanagan valley in central British Columbia. The community was threatened by a wildfire this year and several other communities in the area, like Kelowna, have suffered wildfire losses. When asked what motivated the wildfire preparedness efforts he led in Penticton, Larry Watkinson, Penticton's Fire Chief, responded that this is something he is truly passionate about. "During my career, I have been deployed to many communities that were highly affected by wildfires. As a fire chief, I want to be prepared for wildfire events in our community. The last thing I want is to be standing on my heels saying I'm sorry I wasn't prepared as a fire chief," said Chief Watkinson. He also recognized the social and economic impacts a severe wildfire could have on the community. The City of Penticton is a popular tourist destination, and a wildfire could lead to a catastrophic economic impact on the community.

## THE APPROACH

Several initiatives have been implemented in Penticton to ensure greater operational preparedness to respond to future wildfires. In 2016, Chief Watkinson, along with some of his provincial counterparts, recognized that responding to wildfires in the province was requiring growing involvement of municipal firefighters and fire apparatus. While their efforts are instrumental in protecting structures, municipal firefighters were not equipped with the same training or experience as wildland firefighters. In an effort to optimize wildfire response capabilities, the City of Penticton, with the support of the province of British Columbia, B.C. Wildfire Service, and Office of the Fire Commissioner, planned a Wildfire Urban Interface (WUI) Training symposium for municipal firefighters across the province to provide educational material around topics such as wildfire behaviour and wildland urban interface firefighting operations.

Two hundred firefighters from municipalities across British Columbia and the Yukon were trained in WUI firefighting at the symposium. The event was such a success that the British Columbia Fire Commissioner was invited to audit the program that was presented during the 2017 symposium with the hope of turning this training into a recognized provincial standard for the training of future municipal structural firefighters. Chief Watkinson and his team were then hired to create the official curriculum that would be used for structure defence at wildland fire incidents and the training material is now considered a provincial training standard. The City of



**Figure 15:** *Penticton offered training to municipal firefighters on wildland firefighting. (Source: City of Penticton)*

Penticton was to host the third Wildfire Urban Interface Training Symposium in 2020 to train an additional 250 firefighters coming from 50 municipalities across the province.

The City of Penticton also increased operational preparedness at the local level by developing a wildland urban interface pre-incident plan. The pre-incident planning activities involved a detailed assessment and mapping of the community that took place over three years. When firefighters were not responding to incidents, they were dispatched in the community to gather key information such as variations in topography, the various fuel types present in all areas of the municipality, the location of water supply, potential safety zones, refuge areas, the type of roads and what size of vehicles they can handle, and the location of keys to open specific gates. The data collected was then handed to the City's GIS team, who mapped the entire community with this information. These maps were uploaded into an app that can be easily accessible during an emergency to facilitate response logistics. Since Penticton is likely to rely on outside assistance if a wildfire was to occur, this information will allow all respondents to have access to the same high-quality information.

## **THE OUTCOME**

In addition to the operational preparedness activities, the City of Penticton has also invested in several activities to reduce the overall fire risk faced by the community. For instance, Penticton has been recognized as a FireSmart city with a number of small communities actively engaged in the program. Homeowners are given the

opportunity to have a professional visit their homes to go through a FireSmart risk assessment with them. The City will also be implementing a blue bin system, which involves dropping off large disposal containers in various areas of the community to allow property owners to dispose of their debris (e.g. pine needles, pine cones, other flammable debris located around the property). Finally, the municipality allows controlled burns on private properties through a permit process. More specifically, Penticton allows residents who have properties in the wildland urban interface to burn any debris that could be a fuel threat when a wildfire approaches the community. Before any fire takes place, properties are inspected by a firefighter to ensure the burn is limited to fuel threats and does not present any risk. "We are trying to build resilience against smoke, a little bit of smoke in the spring and the fall as opposed to a lot of smoke in the summer," said Chief Watkinson.

### **A WORD FROM PENTICTON**

When asked what advice he would give to other communities interested in investing in wildfire preparedness, Chief Watkinson mentioned that "It is important to look at all aspects of preparedness. Implementing programs such as FireSmart in your community is very important, but it is equally important to be prepared operationally". Chief Watkinson also encouraged others to look at partnerships that could support the community's preparedness efforts. Provincial partners and representatives from other professional agencies were instrumental in ensuring the success of the various initiatives that were developed by the City of Penticton.