



ROCKYVIEW COUNTY

Fire and flood home protection
program

By Esther Lambert

Source: Rockyview County

THE SCIENCE

At the core of fire and flood home protection programs is a deliberate intention to reduce the risk of adverse impacts of wildfire and flood events by empowering action from homeowners and residents. These programs allow municipalities to work directly with homeowners and residents to facilitate building of awareness of their vulnerability and provide assistance for carrying out effective risk reduction and mitigation measures. This approach engages residents to become active participants in reducing their own risk. Implementing such measures as property assessments, cleaning of gutters or tree removal can go a long way in protecting property and saving lives. The municipality seeks to reduce risk of loss from fire and flooding by encouraging risk reduction action by private property owners.

THE TRIGGER

Rocky View County surrounds the City of Calgary, partially straddling Calgary's western and eastern boundaries and fully tracing its northern boundary. Its population of almost 40,000 is the largest among Alberta's municipal districts. Because of its close proximity to the mountains and the Calgary Forest Protection Area, residents live with the threat of wildfire. Faced with this threat, and having experienced floods in 2005, 2009 and 2013, the municipality started forging partnerships with government partners and non-government organizations to develop its emergency management program centered around disaster prevention and community resilience. Information gathered at open houses and stakeholder meetings with the business sector and residents also inspired the County's move towards a comprehensive and sustainable approach, with a focus on the hazards of wildfire and flooding.

With respect to wildfire risk reduction, in 2019 the County implemented a fire assessment program that is part of a broader Fire and Flood Home Protection Program. This fire assessment program by FireSmart Canada provides a free voluntary property assessment that helps residents identify specific actions they can take to reduce wildfire risks. Additionally, the County offers corresponding grants to individuals who want to undertake risk reduction work on their property. This funding was made available for two years through a \$1.4 million grant from the Canadian Red Cross Society.

THE APPROACH

The wildfire risk reduction aspect of the Fire and Flood Home Protection Program is part of a broader approach to emergency management, dedicated to disaster prevention and the building of community capacity and resilience. This program involves individual homeowners taking actions to reduce their risk, neighbours working together to minimize their combined risk and businesses taking steps to lessen disaster threat in the community. The Rocky View County FireSmart Assessment is undertaken for homeowners who express interest. Through this process, the assessor identifies actions that the homeowner can take to help reduce their risk of loss from wildfire. Residents can then apply for up to \$1,600 under the home fire mitigation grant program. The type of work covered includes tree removal



Figure 16: *FireSmart Home Assessment taking place in Rocky View County.*
(Source: Rocky View County)

within 10 meters of housing structures. A maximum of \$1,500 is available for the removal of up to three trees per household for 100 homes and \$100 per household for conifer tree pruning for 100 homes.

The partnership with the Canadian Red Cross Society that allowed this funding opportunity for residents is an example of the importance that the County places on partnership building in confronting the challenges of emergency management and planning. The municipality also formed committees and groups to address broader issues of economic development and recovery planning, emergency management, people and communities, and planning and development. Experience finds that these are all important in a comprehensive plan addressing the issue of disaster vulnerability as experienced by multiple sectors. Homeowners, businesses and the community at large come to understand their role in reducing risk to disasters.

Public engagement is another important aspect of the County's approach to reducing its risk of losses due to wildfires and other hazards. Stakeholder meetings were held, where community groups across the county, including members from the business sector, were invited and asked questions about how they perceive their risk, and what they think their needs are with regard to building resilience. This information was then taken and developed into a report, which will help guide future programs. These groups and the community at large will continue to be engaged moving forward.

THE OUTCOME

The wildfire risk reduction component of the Fire and Flood Home Protection Program coupled with the County's broader approach to understanding and reducing its risk of losses from wildfires and other hazards has made it more prepared for such events. The program is part of a long-term investment. Fire Chief and Director of Emergency Management, Mr. Randy Smith comments "We haven't had a major fire in our high hazard area. Hopefully, our efforts will pay off should we have a large wildfire." The County is therefore focused on implementing its preventative approach so that it is not caught off-guard.

A WORD FROM ROCKY VIEW COUNTY

One of the most important factors in ensuring the successful implementation of the fire risk assessment and grant program is effective community engagement and resident uptake. This requires public awareness events where homeowners and the larger community can be made aware of programs in place to assist them in reducing their risk and funding opportunities that may be available for home and property protection intervention. As noted by Ms. Carmin Moore, Emergency Management Coordinator, "Without the community's buy in or input, the program will not succeed." It is really a community effort, especially as the inaction of one resident may negatively impact the progress made by others.

Other crucial elements include developing strong partnerships and having patience with the process. Municipalities must understand their limits and form partnerships that can provide resources and expertise that they might not have. However, building relationships takes time, so it is important to also understand that this process may unfold over years. And, as Chief Smith says, "Getting a program like the FireSmart program is helpful. Stay the course. You won't get everything the same year. But in the end, it pays off."