

CELEBRATING LOCAL LEADERSHIP

By Paul Kovacs

Wildfires have resulted in extensive and unprecedented damage in recent years, including major fires in Alberta, British Columbia, California and Queensland, Australia. This report celebrates actions taken by local governments across Canada to anticipate and effectively address this peril. The Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction commends local leaders and other collaborators working to reduce the risk of wildfire damage. Their actions are recognized and appreciated.

The value of buildings and other assets located in or near forests is growing and our climate is changing. These factors contributed to the increase in wildfire losses in Canada over the past 25 years. Nevertheless, actions can reduce or stabilize the future risk of loss. The expectation of more fire in Canada's forests does not need to result in increased destruction of assets and other losses if managed effectively. A warming climate is expected to bring a longer fire season and greater risk of infestations and droughts that erode the health of forests. Forest management and fire suppression costs are expected to continue to increase. These growing risks can, nevertheless, be offset by change in forest management practices and risk reduction action by property owners. The knowledge exists to better cope with this hazard. Indeed, twenty communities are recognized in this report for their leadership in wildfire management.

Large fires can be remarkably destructive, burning forests and destroying structures. Some lives have been lost. Smoke threatens health. Uncertainty imposes stress and mental anguish. Community evacuations disrupt economic activity. Rebuilding and rehabilitation require time and funding. Fires can disrupt ecosystems, increase the risk of flash floods and affect the quality of water supplies. However, fire is also essential to maintain the health of forests and ecosystems. Fire brings renewal and regeneration critical for sustainable forests. We must learn to live with fire in the wildland. The knowledge exists to better manage the impact of fire.

Local governments frequently step up to provide leadership when addressing such significant challenges for society as wildfires. This may involve assessing local exposure, building public awareness of risk, implementing risk reduction actions and overseeing recovery from a loss. Local governments are often best suited to manage community action to address a shared peril, taking a leading role in community planning, development regulation and local fuel management.



Figure 1: Large fires can be remarkably destructive, burning forests and destroying structures. (Source: Adobe Stock Photo)

The Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction (ICLR) is Canada's leading disaster research institute. Supported by its 120 member insurers, the Institute is an international centre of excellence in disaster risk reduction, affiliated with Western University, and a champion for action to reduce the risk of loss from wildfire, flood, severe weather and earthquakes.

Research by the Institute, like this report, is organized around the four priorities for action set out by the Government of Canada and established by the United Nations in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction:

- *Build back better in recovery*
- *Better understand disaster risk*
- *Strengthen disaster risk governance*
- *Invest in disaster risk reduction*

We are excited to identify successful local government actions across Canada addressing wildfire risk reduction consistent with these priorities. Twenty examples are set out in this report and sixty other case studies have been published by the Institute dealing with other hazards, including extreme rainfall, extreme heat and extreme storms.

Local leadership frequently involves collaboration, which may include the joint efforts of neighboring communities, provincial governments or federal agencies. Indigenous communities are often located in areas of risk and may provide unique risk management knowledge. Private industry partners are increasingly involved in collaborations seeking to reduce the risk.

These case studies include communities located in Eastern, Western and Northern Canada. Some communities are large and several are small. Some are located near major population centres with access to considerable support if threatened by fire and several are located in remote locations. All of these communities are vulnerable to the risk of loss and damage from wildfire and have chosen to take action—thoughtful and innovative action that we believe has reduced this risk.

This report celebrates leadership evident in local action that reduces the risk of wildfire damage, but it is also a call for more action. Loss and damage continue to increase at an alarming rate for wildfires and other hazards. Many, perhaps most, losses are preventable through the application of known risk reduction solutions. Local leadership is making a positive difference, but more action is urgently needed. There continues to be growth in assets located in areas known to be high risk without appropriate risk reduction actions. Homeowner adoption of best practice protocols, like FireSmart®, must increase significantly. Community leaders across the country can learn from the positive examples found in this report to build preparedness. These case studies of successful action implemented by communities, large and small, should be embraced as setting out a path forward. Actions implemented in these communities can and often should be introduced elsewhere.