KILLARNEY
Mitigating wildfire risk through multi-level public and private partnerships

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THE SCIENCE

When a wildfire affects a community, the resulting damage extends beyond private properties. In many cases, public and private infrastructure suffer losses as well. As such, there is great value for both the public and private sectors to jointly invest in risk reduction measures. In fact, the development of public and private partnerships can guide the development of complementary risk reduction efforts that will lead to greater protection of communities in the wildland urban interface. Management of wildfire risk is best advanced through collaboration and partnership. These collaborations also contribute to helping communities plan for and manage the financial burden associated with wildfire damage risk reduction actions. Partnerships also build a sense of community united to proactively address a shared threat.

THE TRIGGER

The municipality of Killarney is located on the northern shore of the Georgian Bay District, approximately 100km southwest of the City of Greater Sudbury. Located in the wildland urban interface, the community is home to approximately 385 year-round inhabitants, in addition to an important proportion of cottagers that drive in and out of the community. In July 2018, the Parry Sound 33 forest fire forced the evacuation of several communities, including Killarney. Prior to the fire, very little was happening in terms of wildfire risk reduction in the community. However, this event triggered an increased interest from the community, provincial authorities and private sector to start a common focus on strategies to implement to reduce the wildfire risk faced by the community in the future.

THE APPROACH

As part of their risk mitigation effort, the municipality of Killarney connected both with the provincial government and the private sector. On the provincial front, it reached out to Jim Murphy, FireSmart provincial liaison for Ontario, to assist with the development of a strategy that would reduce the risk of an event like Parry Sound 33 from happening again. The adoption of FireSmart practices quickly became a key element in Killarney’s risk mitigation strategy. More specifically, the municipality reached out to local cottage associations to promote actions that could reduce the risk of wildfire damage around private properties. An initial information session was organized, and all were well attended. In many cases, residents that participated shared the information communicated by the community to their neighbours that were not in attendance. Several additional information sessions are currently planned for upcoming years.

Beyond the actions promoted at the property level, the Town prepared the Municipality of Killarney Community Wildfire Protection Plan. The plan provides strategies and recommendations to address concerns about the threat to public safety, individual properties, critical infrastructure and natural resources, from wildfires in the municipality. Seven key objectives were identified, including training key staff of the municipality to conduct assessments of wildfire risk around individual residences, holding community FireSmart education sessions, conducting hazard mapping at the
In addition to the various actions taken at the property and community level, two important partnerships were established with the private sector to help with both firefighting and recovery efforts. As the fire was evolving, Jim Rook, the Emergency Manager for the municipality, contacted the Canadian National Railway to warn it of the upcoming risk faced to one of its bridges. The organization instantly sent a firefighting crew to the village to protect the structure as well as neighbouring properties. Following the event, both Canadian National and Henvey Inlet Wind, the local supplier of wind energy, offered $5,000 in financial support to mitigate future wildfire risk. This money will be used to support vegetation mitigation efforts in high-risk areas.

THE OUTCOME

Following the publication of the Killarney Community Wildfire Protection Plan, the municipality took action to implement several of the recommendations published in the plan and is in the process of working towards the remaining ones. Several high-risk areas of the community were toured for additional assessment, the Public Works Department has been removing fuel loads around municipal property and critical infrastructure and the first in a series of residential FireSmart education
presentations was held in the Spring of 2019. Education, however, needs to extend beyond residents and target businesses, seasonal workers and tourists. While communication activities were undertaken to inform permanent residents and cottagers of risk reduction actions, it is estimated that more than 140,000 people visit Killarney Provincial Park each year, many of whom enjoy hiking and back country camping. Considering that a substantial proportion of wildland fires originate from human actions, it is very important to provide wildfire risk prevention information to those who vacation in the municipality.

A WORD FROM KILLARNEY

When asked about what recommendations he would offer to other municipalities keen to take action to protect their community from wildfires, Jim Rook mentioned the importance of continuously sharing clear information about risk reduction measures with community members. “We found that showing videos explaining what causes wildfires and how they evolve and how embers spread truly helped residents to better understand the risk faced by their properties,” said Mr. Rook. While it is hard to quantify risk reduction actions around properties, Mr. Rook has noticed a great interest from community members and cottagers in protecting their properties. “There are key risk reduction strategies that are challenging to mandate at the community level because they are not currently part of the building code,” said Mr. Rook. However, while there are no official by-laws in place, the emergency manager noticed that the last roofs that were updated in the community were all replaced by steel roofs, which present a much lower risk of fire damage. This is certainly a strong indication that the communication efforts pursued by the municipality have reached many across the community. In addition to strong communication strategies, Mr. Rook also encouraged communities to reach out to private businesses in the area because they also have a lot to lose.