



**For Immediate release  
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### **ICLR releases major study on 2003 Kelowna wildfires**

#### **The resilience of the City of Kelowna: Exploring mitigation before, during and after the Okanagan Mountain Park Fire**

On January 28, the Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction (ICLR) released a major study evaluating the measures taken by the City of Kelowna, British Columbia to mitigate the impacts of the September 2003 Okanagan Mountain Park Fire (OMPF) and prevent a repeat of such an event in the future.

According to the study, the City of Kelowna independently developed effective communications strategies and a recovery resource management strategy. Though these strategies cannot be considered mitigation, they provide evidence of an autonomous and adaptable municipal government, thus displaying characteristics of a resilient system.

Further aspects of fire and post-fire hazard mitigation explored in this study include:

- The impacts of the OMPF on various departments in the city;
- City staff learning from their experience with Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) management in other communities, and research on communities that had experienced similar WUI fire events;
- A fire guard created during the emergency that protected Kelowna communities from the oncoming OMPF;
- A significant evacuation effort;
- Insurance, government relief and recovery resource management;
- Recovery centres to assist those affected by the fire, and;
- A post-disaster policy window (window of opportunity) created by the OMPF.

The study also noted that various barriers and obstacles to the implementation of mitigation strategies were identified by City of Kelowna staff. A window of

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opportunity was created in Kelowna following the OMPF in which political and public interest in mitigation was high and there was a stronger possibility for the introduction of new mitigation measures or improvements to existing mitigation measures. Those interviewed for the study by author Dan Sandink, manager of resilient cities and research at ICLR, generally estimated that the window of opportunity was two years in length.

Various mitigation measures were developed or improved during this time, including measures focused on reducing post-wildfire flood risk. However, litigation brought against the city as a result of the fire, which destroyed close to 240 homes in the city, served to reduce Kelowna's ability to implement new mitigation strategies during the window of opportunity. Further barriers and obstacles identified in the study included jurisdictional issues regarding bylaws and requirements for fire-resistant building materials and fuel management on Crown lands, the cost of some types of mitigation options and the changing nature of WUI zones. Public perceptions of fuel management approaches and public willingness to adopt mitigation approaches on their own property were also identified by Kelowna officials as barriers to effective adoption of WUI fire management practices in the city.

Interviewees identified limited support from higher levels of government for mitigation approaches pursued by the city as an additional obstacle to implementing mitigation strategies. Specifically, no financial support was provided to the city for several aspects of its post-wildfire flood risk management work. Review of provincial and federal emergency management policies and legislation revealed limited support for mitigation as a component of emergency management.

Interviewees believe that the city's experience with the OMPF, combined with effective mitigation, response and recovery programs, would reduce the impacts of future wildfires in Kelowna. Further, the city applied lessons learned from other communities to Kelowna's own emergency management approaches. The city was also able to adapt to barriers and obstacles presented in various attempts to control WUI fire hazards and postfire hazards. The case study explored in the paper found a municipal staff both willing and able to implement strategies to decrease risk to residents, property and infrastructure. Emergency management in Canada should be altered to allow those cities that are willing and able to pursue actions to mitigate disaster risk.

Established in 1998 by Canada's property and casualty insurers, ICLR is an independent, not-for-profit research institute based in Toronto and at the University of Western Ontario in London, Canada. ICLR is a centre of excellence for disaster loss prevention research and education. ICLR's research staff is internationally recognized for pioneering work in a number of fields including wind

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and seismic engineering, atmospheric sciences, water resources engineering, political science, and economics. Multi-disciplined research is a foundation for ICLR's work to build communities more resilient to disasters.

For a soft or hard copy of *The resilience of the City of Kelowna: Exploring mitigation before, during and after the Okanagan Mountain Park Fire*, or for interviews, contact author Dan Sandink at [dsandink@iclr.org](mailto:dsandink@iclr.org) or phone (416) 364-8677.

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