

# Wildfire in the Highlands

## **Background**

Our Highlands community is an example of the Wildland/Urban Interface (WUI), an area in which homes, farm structures and other outbuildings are found adjacent to combustible wildland fuels such as trees, brush and grasslands. Three sources of fire can impact our community, structure or open burn fires can move into surrounding forests and wildfire can put homes at risk for burning. With the start of fire season (April 1, 2009), the Highlands Fire Department and the Highlands Emergency Program thought it timely to provide Highlands residents with information related to living in the WUI and how to reduce the risk of property loss to wildland fire.

## **What's the threat?**

The threat of wildfire in the Highlands is REAL. The B.C. Wildfire Management Branch provided the following summary of wildfires from their fire reporting system that occurred within the District of Highlands boundaries from 1950 – 2008 (see table below).

Wildfire Cause	Number
Arson	11
Equipment use	3
Open Burning	12
Campfire	10
Juvenile fire setter (child experimenting with fire)	6
Lightning	12
Miscellaneous	25
Smoker	28
TOTAL	107

A total of 107 fires occurred between 1950 and 2008 with 37 (35%) of those fires caused by Lightning, and Miscellaneous (spontaneous combustion, power line short circuit and "undetermined"). Human-caused fires numbered 70 (65%) with Smoker (discarded/match/cigarette/smoking materials) the most common cause with Open Burning, Arson, and Campfires (abandoned and escapes) the next most frequent causes. Interestingly, 3 wildfires were caused by "burning building".

Recent wildfires have included one of 0.5 ha (1.2 acres) in timber debris associated with land clearing just off Hanington Road (May 2004), a roadside fire of about 0.4 ha (1 acre) in the Talon Ridge subdivision (June 2006) and our most recent wildfire located off White Pine Terrace in early August of 2008 (0.2 ha, 0.5 acre).

## ***What Resources are Available to Fight Wildfire in the Highlands?***

The Highlands Fire Department would be “initial attack” on the ground in cases where the wildfire was easily accessible from our road network. The Highlands is within the South Island Fire Zone of the B.C Forest Service . Three 3-person initial attack crews are stationed at the Cobble Hill Fire Base and may be dispatched, either by truck or helicopter to assist our Fire Department on the ground. Truck based crews carry 400 gals of water, hose, a portable pump and fire tools. Depending upon the weather, fire behaviour and degree to which homes are threatened air tankers may be called in to assist. In addition to the BC Forest Service, the Highlands Fire Department also has MUTUAL AID agreements in place with Colwood, Langford, View Royal and Willis Point Fire Departments for supply of water tankers, pumper trucks and personnel as needed.

The White Pine Terrace wildfire of last year was a good example of local fire departments and provincial agencies working together. The B.C. Forest Service had a crew on scene as well as a helicopter bucketing water to protect a nearby home upslope and threatened by the wildfire. Langford, View Royal and Willis Point Fire Departments all provided mutual aid in the form of additional water tankers, pumper trucks and firefighting personnel.

A wildfire of any major size and not showing signs of being contained, will initiate the activation of an Emergency Operations Centre (EOC), most likely at the District Office. The EOC will provide “site support” to the Incident Commander (usually the Fire Chief) located at the scene of the wildfire and who is directing tactical operations. Site support would take the form of gathering and coordinating the deployment of additional resources, strategic planning based on fire behaviour as well as media relations. The EOC would have representatives from various agencies involved in operations, planning and resource acquisition (Fire, RCMP, BC Hydro, BC Ambulance Service, and District Staff). One major consideration for EOC staff to consider would be the possibility of evacuation of residents. The EOC would also be in communication with Emergency Management BC (Provincial Emergency Program) for their assistance as needed.

### ***Evacuation Procedures – if lives are at risk***

An evacuation in the face of a threatening wildfire imposes an impact on the population and is ordered only when and where lives are threatened and where evacuation could potentially prevent injury and death. Every effort is made to balance the rights of individuals to protect their property with the desire to prevent injury and death.

The responsibility for requesting an evacuation rests with the Incident Commander (Highlands Fire Department and/or BC Forest Service personnel) on site. However, in the case of wildfire the responsibility for ordering an evacuation can rest with several different authorities. The BC Forest Service can order a tactical evacuation in urgent situations where time does not allow other options and lives are at immediate risk. As most interface fires present a regional threat, the BC Office of the Fire Commissioner is usually the first option for evacuation Alerts and Orders. If circumstances are such that the District of Highlands declares a state of local emergency then the mayor or council may order an evacuation of all or portion of the Highlands.

Response plans include a three-stage public safety evacuation process, these take the form of a formal written order.

1. **Evacuation Alert:** Authorities issue a warning about an imminent threat to life and property, and people are asked to be ready to leave on short notice.
2. **Evacuation Order:** When the population is determined to be at imminent risk, authorities issue an evacuation order and people must leave the area immediately. The RCMP implement and enforce evacuation orders. They would also provide security and controlled access to the evacuated area.
3. **Evacuation Rescind:** An evacuation order or alert is rescinded (“all clear”) or lifted by authorities when it is determined to be safe for residents to return home. An evacuation order may be reinstated if a threat returns.

Communication of the three–stage evacuation process can occur using any or all of the following methods:

- Local AM radio stations (CFAX)
- Telephone fan-out system (through our HELP Neighbourhood Groups)
- Door to door contact with bulletins or pamphlets
- RCMP patrolling more compact neighbourhoods making announcements via public address or loud hailer systems.

Written communications will include evacuation route maps and Emergency Social Services (ESS) Reception Centre locations (e.g. Langford Legion). Evacuees will be directed to Reception Centres in order to register with ESS so family and friends can confirm they are safe or reunited with loved ones if they are separated. ESS volunteers are able to provide short-term (up to three days) Provincial Government assistance for meals and lodging for those people who are unable to stay with family or friends. Evacuees should call an out-of-area contact and let them know what has happened and where they are going. Personal and family domestic pets (preferably in carrying cases) may accompany their owners to Reception Centers. Those residents with livestock should have a plan in place to trailer or otherwise move large animals to pre-arranged shelter in the event of an evacuation.

During an Evacuation Alert prepare a family “grab and go” Emergency Kit with prescription medications, important household documents, identification and other essential valuables. If time permits, load your vehicle with items that could not be replaced if they were destroyed by fire (family picture albums, videos, and small heirlooms, etc.)



Uncontrolled Wildfire will require evacuation.

## ***What can the homeowner do to lower the threat of wildfire to their home and property?***

- Start with a general yard cleanup. Remove needles, branches and underbrush that could fuel a fire. Get rid of brush, long grass and anything growing under large trees that could cause a fire to spread into those trees and neighbouring trees. Clean gutters of organic debris.
- Prune low-level branches up to at least 2.5 metres above the ground. Replace bark mulch with gravel or decorative rocks.
- Move your woodpile and other flammable materials away from your house or other buildings. Flammable materials should be at least 10 metres away and uphill from your home.
- If your home is on a slope, pay particular attention to the downhill side of your property. Fire can race uphill and burn trees, brush, grass or other flammable materials.
- Never put your life at risk when faced with a fire. Call the fire department (911) immediately.
- For less serious fires, keep a hose and nozzle permanently connected and clearly visible. Make sure you have enough hose to reach your roof and all exterior walls.
- If water pressure is a concern, have a full barrel of water and a 10-litre pail.
- Have a shovel or grubbing tool available to use to prevent a ground fire from spreading.
- Please consult local regulations prior to undertaking any work.

### ***Further Information:***

More detailed information on how to reduce the risk of loss, damage, or injury from wildfire is contained in the attached **FireSmart Home Owners Manual**. As well, you may contact Highlands Fire Chief / Emergency Coordinator Dean Ford at 250-920-6970 or Jason Schuttinga at [emergencycoordinator@highlands.ca](mailto:emergencycoordinator@highlands.ca) if you have any questions or comments. Watch for a "Fire Forum" community meeting sponsored by the Highlands District Community Association in the late Spring.

**NOTE: Fire Season begins** April 1, 2018, and burning permits will be required for open burn piles of 3 ft in height by 3 ft in diameter. Watch the roadside Fire Hazard signs for other restrictions as we move further into the warmer and drier spring/summer months.



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