

Four steps to FireSmart planning: communities managing wildfire in Alberta

EACH FIRE SEASON, wildland fires are sparked in Alberta's natural spaces and the communities that intermingle with these spaces find themselves facing the threat of wildfire. FireSmart invites communities to address the reality of living with wildfire. By preparing for the inevitability of wildfire affecting your community, residents can help their community to build on its connection to natural spaces.

The *FireSmart Guidebook for Community Protection* introduced by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (2009) is a four-step process to address wildfire reality. The planning guide is in draft format, being reviewed by professionals involved in wildfire mitigation and preparedness, and is scheduled for release in spring 2010.

Step 1: Identify the wildfire hazard and risk

The wildfire threat potential is based on characteristics of the forests surrounding the municipal area - including forest type, topography and weather patterns. Wildfire risk is assessed from the backyards of homes to the landscapes beyond. The potential threat of wildfire will determine the level and scope of FireSmart planning required.

A FireSmart community plan has two major components:

- Wildfire Preparedness Guide - operational wildfire suppression guide
- FireSmart Mitigation Strategy - risk management planning to decrease the wildfire threat.

Communities with a lower wildfire threat need only to complete the Wildfire Preparedness Guide. Communities with a high to extreme wildfire threat should undertake both the Wildfire Preparedness Guide and the FireSmart Mitigation Strategy.

Step 2: Identify and Convene Stakeholders

Formation of a local FireSmart Committee is crucial to the success of the FireSmart Community Plan. Committees can range from a few members to several representatives, depending on the scale and complexities of the community.

Step 3: FireSmart community planning

3A - Wildfire Preparedness Guide - operational user's manual in a wildland urban interface fire.

The *Wildfire Preparedness Guide* is a concise document for emergency responders to initiate operations when a wildfire is threatening a community. Stakeholders support this operational plan through legislation, Memorandum of Agreements and Mutual-Aid Fire Control Agreements which provide the mandates necessary to activate during a wildfire event. These plans act as complements to an Emergency Management Plan.

Major components of the Wildfire Preparedness Guide include:

- wildfire behaviour potential
- values at risk inventory
- wildfire strategies and tactics
- resource recommendations
- emergency contact list (of each involved agency).

3B - FireSmart Mitigation Strategy - long-term mitigation and prevention strategies specific to the community.

Actions to reduce the wildfire threat to an acceptable level are contained within the FireSmart Mitigation Strategy. Within the *FireSmart Guidebook for Community Protection*, each of the FireSmart disciplines is defined and gives recommendations for the "quick win" items to help the community build momentum. Highlights of these disciplines are outlined below.

Development - FireSmart provides recommendations for structural options and infrastructure options.

Education and Communication Options - FireSmart is only truly achieved when it is an attitude carried by the residents of a community. Consultation with the community is a crucial part of building a meaningful FireSmart Community Plan. A communications plan should support the FireSmart plan.

Legislation - recommendations for integrating FireSmart legislation into a Municipal Development Plan and Land Use Bylaws.

Interagency Cooperation and Cross Training - A FireSmart Committee should meet at regular intervals to address topics of mutual interest and provide each other advice from their areas of practice.

Emergency Planning - The *Wildfire Preparedness Guide* provides the operational groundwork for emergency planning. This plan should complement the Municipal Emergency Plan and Mutual Fire Control Agreements.

Vegetation Management - assessed based on the most combustible vegetation and the vegetation in closest proximity to development.

Step 4: FireSmart community plan implementation and maintenance

Successful implementation of a FireSmart Community Plan takes commitment from the FireSmart Committee. The plan will outline areas of priority. The Wildfire Preparedness Guide should be updated annually; the FireSmart Mitigation Strategy requires a review every five years.

Having a FireSmart community is not a state of arrival but rather a state that is ever evolving as the community changes and grows. Implementing FireSmart can help communities address the reality of living with wildfire. 🔥

For more information contact your local Wildfire Prevention Officer or contact Tracy Price, FireSmart Community Protection Specialist.
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