

Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources & Forestry (MNRF):
Managing Wildland Fire in the Context of COVID-19

May 6, 2020

Context

The COVID-19 outbreak has created additional challenges for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry's wildland fire program this season. We are taking a proactive and cautious approach to plan, prepare, and respond to wildland fire this year, to ensure we can effectively manage wildland fires and keep our staff and Ontario communities healthy and safe.

Actions – Summary

Since many of the fire program services that MNRF provides are essential, and require staff to be in contact with others, precautions are being taken to ensure the health and safety of our workplaces and communities.

This includes:

- Requiring all new and returning staff to complete a self-assessment prior to the beginning of their employment contract.
- Requiring all staff who need to enter the workplace for critical work, to complete a daily self-assessment to ensure that they:
 - are not showing symptoms of illness;
 - have not travelled internationally; and,
 - have not knowingly come into contact with someone who is ill.
- Adhering to Public Health, Transport Canada and general airline industry standards and guidance for aircraft cleaning and operating standards to reduce exposure to COVID-19.
- Following health and safety prevention guidance recommended by the Chief Medical Officer of Health (e.g., handwashing, avoid touching eyes/nose/mouth, staying home if sick, etc.)
- Developing and implementing protocols about the transport of suspected (or ill) fire staff from the fire line to limit potential exposure or transmission.
- Working with the Ministry of Health (MOH), and following direction from Transport Canada, to ensure appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), including face masks, are used by staff where required in various scenarios.
- Limiting access to fire facilities to necessary personnel only.

- Training/onboarding of staff proceeding online or through MNRF arranged training and facilities, to limit physical distancing wherever possible.
- Renting more accommodations or mobile infrastructure to spread fire crews out across facilities (to increase ability for physical distancing and establish isolation facilities, if required).
- Increasing short-term fleet vehicles in order to ensure one crew/one vehicle, to reduce contamination potential and cleaning requirements.
- Purchasing required supplies, including moving to “Meals Ready to Eat”, to address potential limitations for remote fire bases and staff.
- Working with MOH to determine what additional medical services (e.g., temperature checks/rapid COVID testing) might be requested of our contracted EMT/nursing staff and developing rapid response protocols in event of outbreak at basecamps or other remote facilities.
- Adjusting the approach to wildland fire response this season, in light of COVID-19 in order to reduce the potential for fire on the landscape and to make every attempt to keep fires small.
- This adjusted approach means:
 - More fires may be suppressed than usual and at earlier stages of their detection.
 - Increased reliance on aircraft (e.g., waterbombers, buckets, belly tanks) to suppress and deliver crews for initial attack.
 - Increased fire detection flights, to ensure immediate response upon fire sightings.
- In support of this approach, on April 3 Ontario designated the entire fire region in the province a Restricted Fire Zone (RFZ). Other provinces have done the same or are considering a similar ban.
 - This RFZ supplements municipal fire bans throughout the province.
- Increasing communications and outreach broadly across the province, regarding fire prevention and the FireSmart program.

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