



# Wildfire and the People in Your Community

Wildfire is a natural and essential part of the boreal forest ecosystem, renewing the land by clearing away dead material and prompting the growth of new plants and trees. However, wildfires can impact people when they happen close to communities. With climate change predicted to bring more wildfires to the north, the people who live there can prepare.

## How are people impacted by wildfires?

Wildfires can have a wide range of impacts on people and communities. Fires burning close to communities can threaten homes and trigger evacuations. People may find their mental health is impacted as they experience worry or fear about having to leave their communities or the possibility of losing their homes.

Smoke from wildfires can also impact people in the north. Smoke can lower the air quality in and around communities and can cause breathing problems in vulnerable people, like elders, children, and those with asthma. Smoke can affect air quality enough that people need to stay indoors, which can lead to feelings of isolation and anxiety. Sometimes, smoke can become so severe that community evacuations are needed.

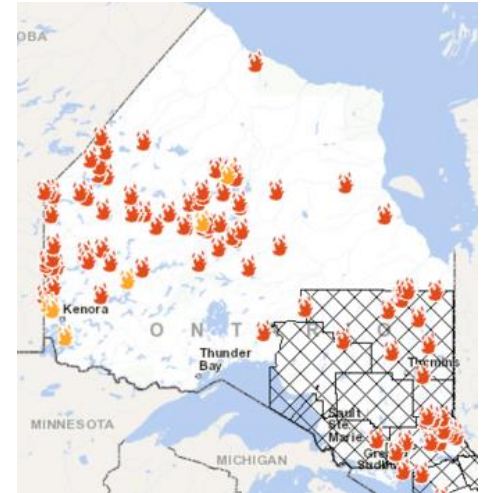
## How will climate change impact wildfires?

Climate change is already bringing hotter summers to the north, with more days over 30°C and more heatwaves than in the past. Hotter temperatures draw more moisture out of plants and soils drying the land which leads to more wildfire ignitions and greater spread. Changes in other seasons, like warmer winters with less snow, warmer springs and faster spring melt, and warmer fall weather, are also impacting the wildfire season, causing it to start earlier in the year and last longer into the fall than it has before.

## What have people noticed?

Evacuations of First Nation communities due to wildfire or smoke danger happen nearly every year. Some recent examples:

- 2019: Pikangikum First Nation was evacuated twice in one season (first in late May, then again in July) as wildfires burned dangerously close to the community.
- 2019: Keewaywin First Nation was evacuated as a fire burned only 8 km away from the community.
- 2018: 80 residents of Wabaseemong Independent First Nations were evacuated for 12 days in July due to heavy smoke from a wildfire in the area.
- 2017: smoke from multiple wildfires lead to the evacuation of over 200 residents from Nibinamik First Nation.



Map of active fires in northern Ontario on July 29, 2019. Map from Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, shared by CBC news.



Forest fire outside Pikangikum First Nation on May 30, 2019. Photo: Twitter/OPP IndigenousBureau



## How can we prepare?

### Prevent human-caused fires

Fire safety is always important, but as the land gets drier causing fires to ignite and spread more easily, preventing human-caused fires becomes even more critical.

- Promote safe fire practices in your community (campfire safety, guidelines for burning grass and yard trimmings, etc.)
- Promote safe fire practices when on the land and point out actions that can cause accidental fires (sparks, cigarette butts)
- Monitor the fire hazard risk in your area. When fire risk is high, communities may want to restrict or ban outdoor burning.

### Monitor for air quality

Monitoring the air quality is important because people can be impacted by wildfire smoke even if the fire is burning at a safe distance away from the community. Tools like FireSmoke Canada (<https://firesmoke.ca/forecasts/current/>) and Canada's Wildfire Smoke Prediction System (<https://weather.gc.ca/firework>) offer maps of current and predicted smoke plumes from wildfire allowing people to take action if necessary. Community alerts can be issued when air quality is poor so people can take precautions. Elders, children, or those with medical conditions can be particularly at risk. Those with a preexisting condition like asthma, should make sure to keep medication on hand if needed.

### Emergency preparedness

Being prepared for emergencies can help events like evacuations happen smoothly and effectively. The "Summer of Smoke" study found that people felt better in emergency situations if they also felt prepared. If your community doesn't have an emergency plan in place, programs like FireSmart can help you create one. Community members and households can also get prepared by:

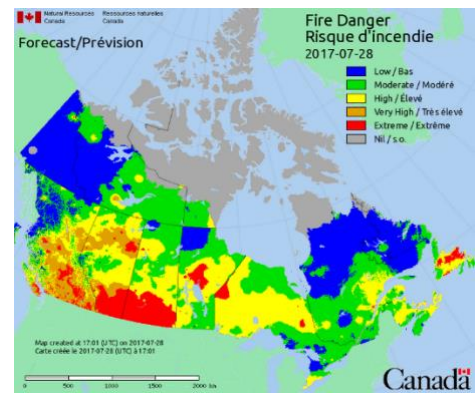
- Being familiar with the community emergency plan, such as where the emergency meeting places are and what evacuation routes to use.
- Preparing a "Grab & Go Bag" that you can quickly grab in case of an evacuation.
- Knowing how to prepare your home before you leave.

### Mental Health Support

The stress of evacuations, the feeling of displacement, and the worry about losing your home can all take a toll on mental health. When smoke advisories keep people inside their homes, feelings of isolation can build. Check in on family and neighbours and continue to push for the mental health services.

### Want to know more?

FireSmart ([www.firesmartcanada.ca](http://www.firesmartcanada.ca)), Summer of Smoke (<https://ecologynorth.ca/project/summer-of-smoke/>), Red Cross ([redcross.ca](http://redcross.ca)), Wildfire smoke air quality and health (<https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/air-quality-health-index/wildfire-smoke.html>)



Tools like the Canadian Wildland Fire Information System (<https://cwfis.cfs.nrcan.gc.ca/home>) can help communities monitor their fire hazard risk.

### When air quality is poor people can:

- Limit outdoor activity
- Keep windows and doors closed at home (as long as it's not too hot)
- Keep car windows closed when driving
- Drink plenty of water
- Leave the area if necessary and possible



Red Cross Canada has checklists of what can go in your Grab & Go bag.