

A Look Back at Wildfire Season 2022

Mr. Speaker, today I would like to provide an update on the 2022 wildfire season. Wildfires are a natural and important part of the boreal forest. They help keep ecosystems healthy, and they burn off excess fuels, like dead and dried out foliage, that builds up within the forest, which can lead to more extreme fires.

That is why our fire crews do not fight all wildfires, particularly if the fire poses no threat to values at risk. When communities, cabins, infrastructure, and other values at risk are threatened however, our wildfire management team is ready to take action.

2022 was a long and busy fire season that started in May and continued well into October. We surpassed the 10-year average for the number of wildfires before the end of July. We recorded a total of 256 fires by early October, with nearly 600,000 hectares burned. This was more than any year since the outlier fire season of 2014.

Fire crews fought 99 of the 256 fires that occurred in the territory this season, which lasted much longer than usual. This year we saw fires continue to flare up as late in the season as the first week of October, which is well beyond the end of a typical wildfire season.

As Minister of Environment and Natural Resources, I am very proud of the excellent work of the wildfire management team this year. They worked incredibly hard to respond to every threat and keep NWT communities safe.

Every wildfire season requires careful planning to make sure staff are well trained and adequately prepared for the challenging work of fighting fires. The wildfire management team must ensure that the right resources are dispatched to the right locations to manage fires throughout the season. In total this summer, we had firefighters working on 34 crews in communities across the Northwest Territories, including 22 crews contracted from

Indigenous companies. We also hired 131 additional Firefighters to support firefighting efforts throughout the summer.

In addition to crews on the ground, we also work with pilots, air attack officers, and tanker base teams to provide critical air tanker support to suppress fires from the air. Firefighting efforts also require staff with expertise in fire behaviour, weather, remote communications, logistics, finance, administration, and public information, to help support decision-making, operations, and public awareness.

Over the course of the summer, we were grateful to receive support from Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Parks Canada. This support is incredibly valuable, particularly in a busy season like 2022.

Mr. Speaker, just 10% of wildfires this season were caused by humans. I am happy to report that this percentage has decreased steadily in recent years, it has come down from 27.1% in 2020 and 12.2% in 2021. This is a testament to an enhanced awareness and outreach campaign by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, and it reflects the efforts made by residents and visitors to practice fire safety.

I am also very proud to say that despite dozens of fires that approached several communities throughout the summer, none of these communities' required evacuation.

Unfortunately, unusually strong winds coupled with very dry conditions late in the season resulted in the loss of two cabins. We recognize this is very difficult for those impacted, but thankfully no people were hurt in those fires.

Mr. Speaker, managing wildfire is not limited to the summer months. There is important work that must be done in the offseason as well. This work includes FireSmart projects and community protection initiatives, which will receive an unprecedented additional investment of 20 million dollars from the federal government in the coming years. In collaboration with the Northwest Territories Association of Communities, we will work with remote communities to create fire breaks and implement fire fuel reduction strategies for

over 12 hundred hectares of land across the territory, reducing the risk of wildfires and offering even greater protection to thousands of residents.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources will continue to focus on staff training and development, building a skilled, engaged, and representative workforce to support these efforts for years to come. This year we offered another Extra Firefighter training session specifically for women and non-binary individuals to increase diversity on our wildfire team.

We also make evaluation and planning a priority. Every season offers many opportunities to learn from our experiences, and we take full advantage of these opportunities. We regularly evaluate and analyze the research and data gathered and use this information to improve and plan for next year.

Mr. Speaker, as most communities in the territory are situated in the middle of the boreal forest, wildfires will always be something we need to monitor closely. Our government will continue to work with our partners across the territory to ensure that residents, communities, and infrastructure are kept safe from wildfires.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.