

2023 Wildfire Season

Mr. Speaker, wildfires are a natural part of our northern landscape, and are important for forest health and renewal. However, we also recognize that wildfires can pose a significant threat to our communities, our infrastructure, and other values at risk.

I want to start by recognizing the challenges faced by the K'atl'odeeche First Nation and the Town of Hay River during a historically early start to our wildfire season. Our hearts go out to everyone who had to evacuate their homes, and to those who lost homes from this wildfire. I would like to thank the fire crews and wildfire management teams who have worked so hard on this fire and continue to work on protecting these communities.

Mr. Speaker, we have a tough wildfire season ahead of us. Temperatures are expected to be high and our forests are very dry, increasing the wildfire risk in the southern half of the NWT. We are still very early in the fire season, even though the events near K'atl'odeeche First Nation make it feel like it has been a full season already.

Mr. Speaker, our government is well prepared for this year's fire season. Our team of wildfire professionals work all winter long to be ready to go once the fire season starts. A huge amount of work goes on behind the scenes to support our field operations. Like we do with flooding, our communications team put out a lot of proactive wildfire messaging in advance of the season, and we work with Municipal and Community Affairs and the Emergency Management Office, who are ready to activate on any emergency, including fires, at any time.

As soon as we received the weather forecasts for the 2023 fire season, it became clear we could have an early start to the season. We brought on more resources and started them earlier than we have in the past. There are 34 four-person crews positioned across the territory this year ready to fight fires on the ground: an increase of two from last year. We updated contracts to bring our long-term aircraft on several weeks early, and added some additional tankers to be able to respond to a hot, dry season. When the fire near

Kátł'odeeche First Nation and Hay River started, we already had airtankers and helicopters on the ground, brought on strength several weeks early, that were ready to respond the morning the fire started. We had an Electra working out of Hay River, as well as helicopters bucketing water on the fires. Two other tanker groups were scheduled for an early startup for May 15th and started working on the fire that day. There were a number of days when aircraft could not land at Hay River airport due to smoke, but the Electras continued to operate out of the Yellowknife as the next closest air tanker base. This proactive approach allowed us to have aircraft and crews on-site to immediately respond to our first big challenge of the season.

So far this summer, we have had 17 fires with a total of 18,365 hectares burned. Of these, eight have been human caused close to communities. The 10-year average for this time is three fires and 17 hectares burned. Our season started several weeks early and is way ahead of what we normally expect to see in terms of timing, numbers and human caused fires.

Mr. Speaker, despite this challenging start, I am proud to say that we were prepared and ready for this season and our teams have responded quickly and effectively so far. Going forward for the rest of the summer, we have 100 people working in our fire program, from remote communication specialists, to clerks, to logistics personnel, to ensure firefighters on the ground have the support they need every day. We also have a pool of approximately 200 extra firefighters we can call on to help mop up fires and take on other crucial wildfire operation activities.

Throughout the K'atł'odeeche First Nation-Hay River fire, we have seen the extraordinary skill and dedication of our wildfire teams in action as they have worked around the clock. People from across the territory have come together to help limit the fire's growth and impacts to our communities. Fire crews and other wildfire staff from every region in the NWT have come together to provide a coordinated, effective, and tireless response. I want to reiterate what I have heard from many members of the public and extend a heartfelt thank you to all of our wildfire staff for their incredible work to keep our communities safe.

Mr. Speaker, we continue to work with communities to strengthen their protection against wildfires. With \$20 million in investment leveraged by the NWT Association of Communities, work is going ahead to complete fuel breaks in communities at an unprecedented rate. Community wildfire protection plans are in place in all 29 forested communities. Our government will continue to provide advice to communities and work with them to increase their resilience and reduce the risk of damage from future wildfires.

Mr. Speaker, we are also making investments for people to get the tools they need to reduce their own risk at home. One important tool is the promotion of FireSmart practices around people's homes, cabins, and businesses. Taking steps ahead of time to remove things that burn around your home and property will help reduce the risk of damage when fires hit close to home. With much of the season still ahead of us, we want to remind people it is never too too early to take these steps. You can start by cleaning under your deck, moving firewood away from your home, keeping your gutters clear, and getting rid of brush and debris from around your yard. I encourage residents to search FireSmart NWT to learn more, and follow the guide to FireSmart your property.

Given the hot and dry conditions we expect for the southern NWT this summer, it is critical that people take their role in preventing fires seriously. We will continue to do our part to provide public information and updates regularly to help people make good choices. Mr. Speaker, I want to be very clear when I say this: wildfires like the one near the K'at'l'odeeche First Nation can happen to any NWT community below the treeline.

With dry forests and lots of natural fuels, it only takes one spark to start a wildfire. It then takes just a bit of strong wind for it to spread and become a real problem for communities, for people who live there, and for the firefighters trying to protect us.

Everyone has a part to play in preventing wildfires. During the Kát'l'odeeche First Nation and Hay River fire, the impacted communities stepped up to play a large, critical role in the coordinated response, and we commend them for their work and will continue to be there to support them.

Individuals can do their part by not starting campfires or any other burning when the danger is high or extreme as it has been for most of May, and will be for some time to come.

Choices like never leaving fires unattended and always soaking them, stirring them, and soaking them again until they are cool to the touch before leaving. It is also important to be spark aware by cleaning out mufflers on your ATVs, never parking in dry grass, and checking your chains before taking your trailer down the highway.

Mr. Speaker, as leaders, we have a responsibility to make good decisions, and be models for these behaviours. I call on everyone in this House to take these messages to your communities, and help us reduce the alarming number of person-caused fires we have already seen this season. We will all be safer for it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.