

**THE HONOURABLE SHANE THOMPSON
MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT AND
NATURAL RESOURCES**

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2020 Wildfire Season

Mr. Speaker, the wildfire season this year is off to a slow start thanks to cooler temperatures in May, right across the territory. It is only been in the last week or so that things are finally starting to warm up. Hot weather is predicted through June and July with temperatures well above normal. These are prime conditions for wildfire.

As of this week, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources has responded to one wildfire in the Northwest Territories. This fire is suspected to be human-caused and is under investigation. Mr. Speaker, it is critical that residents use extreme caution with campfires while out on the land. This is especially important early in the season when the land is often dry. People planning to do spring brush or grass burning must get a burn permit, and make sure they have water and tools on hand to put it out.

Mr. Speaker, COVID-19 presents some unique challenges this fire season. Staff at Environment and Natural Resources have been preparing for months, learning from other parts of the country whose fire seasons began weeks or months before our own, and establishing best practices to keep our fire crews and communities safe.

Large fires require a large response, Mr. Speaker, many people working closely together, eating and sleeping in close quarters. Physical distancing is not possible on your way to a fire, whether you are traveling by aircraft or by vehicle. Setting up pumps and pulling hose around a fire needs teamwork and people working alongside one another.

That is why we have put in place new health and safety measures for our wildfire operations this year. Fitness testing and training and camp protocols have been modified to limit group sizes; new briefing formats keep face-to-face interactions to a minimum; and

surfaces are more frequently cleaned and sanitized. We are also monitoring the health of our fire crews and staff on a daily basis.

Mr. Speaker, wildfires also produce a lot of smoke which can be hard on residents with existing health conditions. In a worst case scenario, wildfires can require community evacuations. Physical distancing would be extremely challenging while evacuating large numbers of people, and add additional stress on communities, residents and emergency responders.

This is why we have adjusted our wildfire response strategies this year to take into account the additional challenges of COVID-19. To limit the risks to our fire crews and communities, we will aim to catch fires early. We will also be more aggressive in how we fight fires to keep them as small as possible. As I mentioned, large fires require a large response, and we want to keep the number of crews on a fire to a minimum, and try to avoid bringing in crews from outside the Northwest Territories.

Under certain conditions, we may also need to put in place fire bans to reduce human caused fires and consider restricting burning when the fire danger is moderate or higher.

Mr. Speaker, it is important to recognize fire is an important and necessary part of the forest ecosystem. Historically, Environment and Natural Resources responds to less than half of the wildfires on the landscape in any given fire season. Each fire that is actioned increases the risk of fire in future years. That is because forest fuels build up to a point where controlling new fires becomes more challenging, and can result in greater human, financial and ecological impacts. While more fires will be actioned in 2020, not every fire will be fought.

Environment and Natural Resources has reviewed the additional COVID-related measures for the 2020 season with the Chief Public Health Officer and the Departments of Municipal and Community Affairs and Health and Social Services, which are in support of the plan.

Environment and Natural Resources will continue to work collaboratively throughout the season to ensure a coordinated effort.

Mr. Speaker, it is so important, perhaps now more than ever, that each one of us does our part to prevent wildfire. This year, Environment and Natural Resources launched a new contest to encourage residents to FireSmart their properties while maintaining physical distance from others. I encourage Northwest Territories residents to take part. Clearing brush, raking leaves, even cutting your lawn, can help keep your home safe.

Finally, I would just like to remind everyone to be careful on the land. Do not let your campfire become a wildfire. By reducing the number of fires in the Northwest Territories this summer, we can all help keep our fire crews and our communities stay safe and healthy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.