

Wildfires: Keeping Workers Safe

British Columbia's forests and wildlands cover over 94 million hectares (nearly a million square kilometres). According to the BC Wildfire Service, there are approximately 1,600 wildfires in the province each year. While most wildfires are contained within the first 24 hours, those that aren't present an immediate hazard to anyone nearby.

Employer Obligations: Emergency Preparedness and Response

Employers in B.C. are required to conduct a risk assessment in any workplace in which a need to rescue or evacuate workers may arise. Where a risk is present — such as wildfires — written procedures must be developed and implemented, and all workers must be given adequate training on emergency evacuation procedures.

Employers in B.C. are required to:

- Conduct a risk assessment to determine the most likely emergency situations in your workplace.
- Develop appropriate written procedures for evacuation or rescue.
- Provide well-marked means of escape in the event of an emergency.
- Ensure that emergency procedures consider the safety of disabled workers.
- Conduct drills at least once every year.
- Provide training to employees in emergency procedures and fire prevention.
- Have first aid resources onsite.
- Provide appropriate personal protective equipment for workers doing the rescue or evacuation.

Due to the seriousness of wildfires and other hazards, emergency response planning has been identified as a critical target area for WorkSafeBC's 2021-2023 high-risk strategy for forestry. In addition, when weather conditions create a hazard for a forestry worker, additional precautions must be taken as necessary for the safe conduct of the work.

Wildfire Smoke

Wildfire smoke can travel long distances from the fires. For outdoor workers, employers should look for ways to reduce workers' exposure to wildfire smoke, including:

- Follow air quality advisories in the area and schedule work accordingly. For example, look for ways to relocate work to less smoky areas or reschedule it until the air quality improves.
- Reduce outdoor physical activity or exertion.
- In some circumstances, personal protective equipment (PPE), such as respiratory protection, may be necessary when workers are exposed to moderate to high levels of smoke. Ensure that the correct respirator is selected to provide the needed level of protection and ensure that all workers wearing respirators are fit tested.
- Workers who primarily work in vehicles are advised to keep vents and windows closed and, if available, operate the air conditioning in "recirculate" mode.

For indoor workplaces, steps employers can take to reduce the amount of wildfire smoke entering their building include:

- Inspect the HVAC system to make sure it is working properly.
- Check the HVAC system's air filters to ensure they are clean and are not damaged, dislodged, or leaking around the edges.
- Temporarily reduce the intake of outdoor air. This should only be done in consultation with a qualified HVAC technician or ventilation engineer.
- Reduce indoor particle levels in small areas by using individual portable air cleaners equipped with high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters or electrostatic precipitators.

Additional Resources:

- [Health and safety resources for wildfire season](#). WorkSafeBC provides health and safety information for wildfire seasons.
- [Wildfire Smoke: Frequently Asked Questions](#). WorkSafeBC has prepared this document with information about smoke, the potential health effects of wildfire smoke, symptoms of exposure, and precautions that should be taken to minimize exposure.
- [Emergency Response Planning: 12 Tips for an Effective Emergency Response Plan](#). WorkSafeBC has developed these planning tips to help employers and workers be better prepared for any emergency situation.
- [Wildfire Evacuation Planning](#). This WorkSafeBC resource lists the items employers who operate in remote locations need to consider as part of an Emergency Evacuation Plan.
- [Get Prepared for a Wildfire in British Columbia](#). The provincial government provides information on emergency preparedness for a wildfire in B.C.
- [B.C. Wildfire Dashboard](#). The B.C. Wildfire Service provides updated information on the number and location of wildfires in B.C., as well as fire evacuation orders and alerts.

The above resources are intended for general workplace environments where people may be exposed to wildfire smoke or heat. Wildfire fighters face specific hazards and exposures and detailed information is available at: [Part 26 of the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation](#).

For more information:

media@worksafebc.com