

It's no secret that wildfires have become increasingly frequent and severe in Canada and pose threats to homeowners, commercial property owners, and communities alike. From climate change and forest management to human behaviour and regional population growth, many factors contribute to increased wildfire occurrences and risks. Wildfires, also referred to as forest fires, can have extreme fire behaviour that can negatively impact human health, the economy, and the natural environment. Where commercial businesses are concerned, wildfires pose risks to physical assets, business continuity, as well as staff and customer safety.

It's imperative for commercial property owners to be proactive in their wildfire preparedness and response strategies. This guide is intended to provide commercial property owners with an overview of strategies to enhance their preparedness, mitigate potential damage, and ensure an effective response in the event of a wildfire.

Planning and Preparation

Ensuring a response plan is in place can significantly impact the safety of staff and customers during a wildfire, as well as a business's ability to rebound afterwards. Here are some key strategies to assist business owners prepare for an emergency event:

- Develop a wildfire emergency plan that considers how fires may travel and spread across a business' property; an action plan and escape routes should be based on the topography of an area. It's imperative that this plan is made accessible to all employees, and training be conducted regularly to ensure staff members are aware of how to react in the event of an emergency.
 - Consult with local fire departments for fire mitigation or evacuation strategies.
 - Set up ongoing data backups for your computer systems to ensure data can be accessed remotely in the event of an emergency.
- Where possible, arrange to have an alternate location(s) to maintain operations away from wildfire zones during an emergency event.
- Consider the overall fire resiliency of your structure if located in a vulnerable area.
 - When planning for new construction or renovations, business owners should consider building with Class A shingles or roof coverings. Class A roof coverings can withstand severe fire exposure from flying embers and can also withstand direct flame exposure without catching fire. For more information, download the [FireSmart™ Roof Fact Sheet](#).
 - Utilize exterior cladding made of non-combustible material such as metal, brick, or fibre cement board instead of materials such as vinyl or wood. When conducting regular building maintenance, examine existing siding and exterior walls for locations where embers could accumulate and remove any debris in these areas.
 - Consider upgrading to double pane or tempered glass windows, which are less likely to shatter under intense heat and are, therefore, more effective in mitigating fire spread within a building. In addition, business owners should consider installing steel shutters that can roll down over windows to protect openings.
- If infrastructure allows for fire sprinkler systems, business owners should consider installing a system that includes an exterior water curtain system, which can have a significant impact on protecting a building from heat radiation.

- Install defensible landscaping and create vegetation-clear zones around commercial buildings.
 - Grass should be kept short, and the number of shrubs and vegetation around structures should be minimal. Instead, incorporate fire-resistant plants into landscaping. This type of plant does not readily ignite from flame or other ignition sources. For more information on fire-resistant plants, download the [FireSmart Guide to Landscaping](#).
 - Wood mulch should be avoided, and replaced with stone, gravel, or landscape rock.
- As part of regular maintenance, gutters and roofs should be cleaned to ensure needles, leaves, and debris are removed. Combustible items, such as extra stock or recycling, should be moved away from a building.
- It's also important that all staff know how to turn off utilities such as natural gas or propane in the event of an emergency. However, hydro and water should remain 'on' unless instructed otherwise by fire authorities.

Wildfire Activation Response

In the event of a wildfire emergency, the following steps should be taken to ensure the safety of staff and customers while minimizing the potential impact on business operations:

- Wildfires should be monitored, such as through the Government of Canada's [Fire Weather Map](#) or through the [Alert Ready](#) emergency alerting system. If determined to be in a high-risk area, business owners and staff should begin to employ their wildfire emergency plan.
 - The safety of staff and customers is more important than a business' belongings or possessions and should, therefore, be considered first and foremost when activating a wildfire response plan. This means that all staff members and, if applicable, customers, should be accounted for.
- If applicable, business owners and staff must follow evacuation orders when instructed to by local authorities.
- An emergency 'to-go' bag containing essential supplies and important items such as hard copies of business records, insurance policy information, computers and/or hard drives, as well as other relevant documents should be prepared.
 - A fire-rated safe bearing a UL/ULC Certification Class 350°F Two-Hour fire rating should be considered for storing sensitive items such as business records or electronics.
- If applicable, a property's emergency water source (i.e., a pond, well, reservoir etc.) should be clearly identified and made visible from surrounding roadways so that it may be used by fire personnel.
- A building's gas and/or propane lines should be shut off.
- All windows should be shut, including steel shutters if applicable. All combustibles should be moved inside, and items cleared from around the property's perimeter.
- Business owners should consider activating lawn sprinklers around a property to reduce potential spread of fire and heat radiation.
- Business owners should consider turning all lights on to improve a building's visibility, which can aid firefighting response at night or in heavy smoke.

By taking a proactive approach to wildfire preparedness and response, commercial property owners can significantly reduce the potential impact of wildfires, safeguard their investments, and contribute to the overall resilience of their community.