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NEWS RELEASE

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Gaps in wildfire detection services put northerners at risk

Large areas of northern Saskatchewan are currently without wildfire detection services, placing families and communities at risk as the fire hazard grows, according to SGEU.

Fire towers are being dismantled as government moves to an automated video surveillance system, but video cameras have not yet been installed to replace human observers, leaving areas without adequate detection services.

“Who is safeguarding people in these communities?” asks SGEU President Bob Bymo. “Weather conditions have changed in the last week and the fire hazard is extreme, but in many areas there are no fire tower observers and no video cameras to detect wildfires.”

Environment Minister Ken Cheveldayoff has told SGEU that air detection will be used during the transition from staffed towers to the automated system, but at present there are no helicopters or air craft engaged in fire detection south of La Ronge, says Bymo.

Thousands of community members have signed petitions and sent letters to the Minister and their MLAs to request that fire tower observers stay on the job, according to Bymo. “Clearly, people are worried about these decisions, and concerns are growing today as the fire hazard grows,” he adds.

Government announced in March that it would eliminate fire tower observers from 42 towers and replace them with video cameras for the 2014 fire season. Approximately a dozen towers across the north have already been de-commissioned, but have not been set up on the new automated system.

“We urge Ministry officials to reassess the situation and take the necessary steps to ensure the safety of northern communities,” Bymo concluded.

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