

WILDFIRE CRISIS 2015

Government fails
to protect and preserve

THE FACTS

- 45% cut in the provincial wildfire budget in the past six years
- 17% cut in Ministry of Environment staff
- each Initial Attack Firefighting Team cut from five to four members, for a loss of 38 jobs
- 40 fire Tower Observers cut, and replaced with cameras

CUTTING BUDGETS

The 2015-16 budget included “a \$1-million cut to the Ministry of Environment Forest Fire Operations.”

– Star Phoenix, July 7, 2015

CUTTING FIREFIGHTERS

“The Environment Ministry employed 866.4 full-time equivalent positions this year, down significantly from 1,040 in 2009-10.”

– Star Phoenix, July 22, 2015

An independent, public review – and changes – needed to keep northern families and communities safe

It was the worst wildfire crisis to hit northern Saskatchewan in living memory. Fires raged out of control, threatening 51 communities. Over 10,000 people were forced to evacuate. Homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed.

Northerners – and people from across the province – courageously answered the call to help. They fought fires. Assisted families in need. Opened their homes to evacuees.

Saskatchewan people stepped up to respond. But now government needs to answer for its failure to be prepared.

Government needs to fix problems created by years of budget cuts, downsizing and mismanagement.

Government fails to protect and preserve

A perfect storm

- shortage of firefighters, especially those with training and experience
- lack of equipment
- no observers in fire towers
- poor communication
- questionable management of scarce resources

THE FALLOUT: A MISMANAGED RESPONSE TO AN EXTREMELY DANGEROUS CRISIS



The last-minute scramble

“The province has acknowledged it doesn’t have enough staff and has started a hiring blitz in the hope of having up to 400 new firefighters on the line within 10 days to two weeks. Officials say the new hires will attend a shorter training course than usual.”

– Canadian Press, July 9, 2015

Not enough experienced crews

A shortage of regular firefighters meant that those with less training and experience were forced to take on duties they were not trained for or equipped to handle – creating problems:

- Sprinkler systems intended to save homes and lodges didn’t work properly, due to faulty setup.
- Truckloads of hoses were burnt.

A SAFETY RISK

- First year firefighters were put in charge of crews with little experience.
- Firefighters with less training and experience were working on fire lines, a job traditionally done by experienced firefighters only.
- Overall the shortage of firefighters prevented a swift and effective response. For example, there weren’t enough fire-line locators, which meant there was often no one available to direct the heavy equipment.



Not enough equipment

- Firefighting equipment was in short supply. Much had been sold for salvage. For example, hoses of all types, and parts of the sprinkler systems, had been sold off or given to Emergency Management and Fire Safety.
- A lack of trucks to transport people and equipment to and from fires slowed response time.
- The size of the supply caches was cut from enough to supply 250 firefighters down to enough for only 50. This led to a shortage of equipment. If two fires broke out in a day, there would be very limited equipment in the fire cache area to fight the second fire.



The cost

Firefighters, families and communities were put at risk. No one knows how many people were injured due to smoke inhalation and burns. Over 100 structures were lost. Small businesses and companies that rely on tourism were hard hit, and may suffer the effects for years to come.

This is what happens when budgets for firefighters, Tower Observers and equipment are eliminated.

Bad choices

“A stronger initial attack on the wildfires threatening La Ronge could have prevented a lot of angst, said [Chief Tammy] Cook-Searson.”

– Leader-Post July 25, 2015

Chaos and confusion

- When fires were small, requests for heavy equipment such as water bombers were denied for various reasons: no fire map; wind blowing the wrong way; fire three miles from the full-response zone.
- Sprinkler systems were withdrawn from cabins after being set up.
- Fires were allowed to grow because heavy equipment was ordered from one fire to another before the first fire was under control.
- Every decision had to be cleared by head office in Prince Albert, which slowed down response time.

CREWS UNDER PRESSURE

- Firefighters were not allowed any time off for prior commitments. If someone needed to return home for any reason including emergencies, they were not allowed to return to the fire line for the rest of the season, which meant experienced workers were lost from the fire line.
- There were no safety officers at most fire sites.
- Emergency Fire Management personnel did not have high-visibility safety apparel. They were dressed in all black in the fire zone – making a dangerous situation worse.

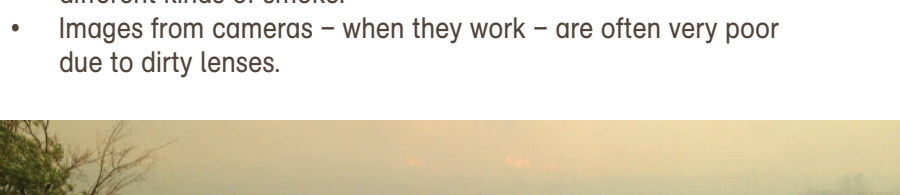


Tower Observers replaced with unreliable cameras

Government’s earlier decision to replace fire Tower Observers with video cameras made a bad fire situation worse.

When tower staff were on the job, they played a crucial role in battling fires. From their lookout position, they could communicate with ground crews and provide locations and coordinates with pinpoint accuracy up to sixty kilometres.

- During the crisis, many cameras were not working. When they were functioning, not only did they have a limited range – 20 kilometres – but they also sent people to wrong locations. Too often, the cameras didn’t discover fires until they were too big to be easily handled.
- The cameras don’t locate fires with the pinpoint accuracy that Tower Observers provided because they can’t use cross shots to effectively triangulate fire locations. This meant a lack of good data to guide firefighters. As a result, crews were often sent to locations that were more than 10 kilometres off the mark.
- Without the communications support from Tower Observers, one crew was cut off from radio contact for six hours, which is extremely dangerous.
- Experienced firefighters were pulled off the front lines to investigate ghost fires as often as six times in a day due to malfunctioning cameras.
- Cameras cannot effectively pick up fires in smoky conditions – whereas a Tower Observer is able to distinguish between the different kinds of smoke.
- Images from cameras – when they work – are often very poor due to dirty lenses.



This year’s firefighting budget was cut by \$1 million – and it cost over \$100 million to respond to the wildfires.

Does this make sense?

HELP MAKE SURE THIS NEVER HAPPENS AGAIN.

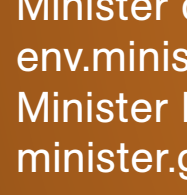
Tell government we need:

- a substantial increase in budget, resources and firefighters
- an independent, public review of the wildfire crisis of 2015

Contact:

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**Our families and communities
deserve better**