



THE RIGHT ANSWER TO THE BURNING QUESTION

This may be the year that TLA members need to answer the burning question: Are you ready for the real possibility of a forest fire?

No one can say when that question will come up, but it's been a while since British Columbia's last bad fire season covered more than 220,000 hectares across the province. That was in 2004 and the previous year was even worse. It left 265,000 hectares burnt, more than triple the average 81,000 hectares consumed every year by wildfires.

After four years of relative calm, 2009 could be another bad year. On the Coast now, we see a low snow pack – only 56 per cent of normal for Vancouver Island – and minimal rainfall leaving very dry duff and sub-surface soil. In the Interior, the big worry is dry mountain pine beetle wood, as anyone in the 70 Mile House

area can tell you after the early May blaze there.

All that brings us back to the basic question of being ready. For contractors, this means satisfying requirements in the provincial *Wildfire Act* managed by the B.C. Ministry of Forests and Range (MOFR). More information is online at www.bcwildfire.ca/LegReg.

In what's called a "results-based" system, forestry operators must practice "due diligence" for individual situations. In 2005, this approach replaced the "prescriptive" regulations that laid out detailed requirements that everyone had to satisfy.

What hasn't changed is that you are still obligated to be ready to deal with wildfires, based on the work being done and the hazard levels. The *Wildfire Act* classifies pretty well everything related to timber harvesting as high risk in terms of fire potential. This ranges from road building to logging and from chainsaws to helicopters.

With due diligence, it's up to you to anticipate, plan and prepare on your own to deal with fire situations that can reasonably be expected to affect your work site and activities. Basically, use your knowledge, common sense and experience – to assess what you might need and then put the necessary resources in place.

First of all, you are responsible for reporting any fire that you spot. Every worker should know they can call toll-free to 1-800-663-5555 or, even better, dial *5555 from their cell phone. However, you also have a fundamental responsibility to take initial suppression action to control a fire until you can hand off responsibility to an incident commander. With that in mind, here are some basic due diligence requirements:

A fire action plan if your client doesn't supply one.

Either way, you need to decide how to implement it. For instance, where do you locate firefighting equipment and will you rely on tanks or a natural source of water if fire breaks out? What's your plan for communications by your crew and anyone else on or near the work site?

A fire response plan that makes sure that reports of fires include information like

site coordinates, firefighting resources already there, weather conditions and whether homes and power lines are in the area. (MOFR should know roughly where you are because licensees, including those for community forest agreement and woodlots, must give the ministry advance notice every year of any work to be done between March 1 and November 1.)

Ensuring adequate firefighting gear for everyone on your crew.

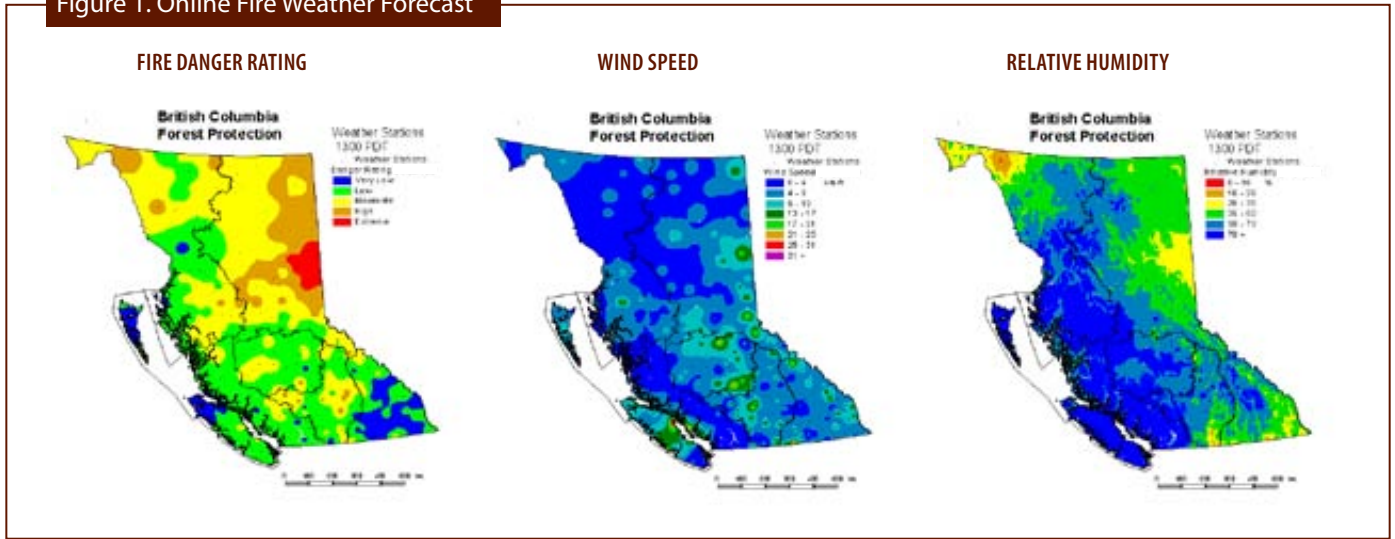
This goes beyond hand tools. You'll also need a fire suppression water delivery system with pump, hoses, and designated water source.

WorkSafeBC guidelines also require forest workers fighting fires to have completed the S-100 Basic Fire Suppression



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Figure 1. Online Fire Weather Forecast



and Safety Course. It covers fire behaviour, methods of fire suppression, basic tools and equipment, water delivery systems, fire line procedures and safe use of chemicals used in firefighting. The course must be taught by a qualified instructor listed at www.bcwildfire.ca/Employment/FireFighter/instructors.htm.

And don't forget to check that your fire fighting insurance coverage is up-to-date.

Naturally, what you really want is never to use all that due diligence planning and preparation. You want to prevent forest fires.

Start by paying attention to the weather. Look for a higher risk of fire after an extended hot spell without rain, say a week or more. Air movement also matters because fire spreads faster in strong breezes or consistent winds than in calm conditions. South facing slopes will be drier, posing a greater risk. Another critical factor is moisture in the air and a relatively inexpensive sling psychrometer will measure low relative humidity that raises the fire risk. If the risk is too high, you may need to go to fire hours or shut down altogether. (A useful online source of current information is www.bcwildfire.ca/weather, run by the MOFR Protection Branch. See examples of weather forecast available in Figure 1.)

It's also good to remember that fires aren't always Mother Nature's fault. People cause more than 40 per cent of the wildfires in our province.

You also need to be very careful working in the woods. For instance, avoid letting sawdust and fines accumulate in the engine compartments of heavy equipment. A recent incident involved an engine fire

that was finally put out because the operator of another nearby machine had two fire extinguishers with him. Two lessons to learn from this incident are to wash or blow-out engines regularly or between shifts and to carry extra fire extinguishers even when engines have built-in fire suppression capability.

Ultimately, the right answer to the burning question comes down to planning, preparation and prevention. Applying all

three will satisfy your due diligence obligations – and help to reduce the number of fires in B.C. **TLA**

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