

Chapter 36

Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency—Detecting Wildfires

1.0 MAIN POINTS

As of September 2021, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency made some progress in addressing our one remaining recommendation relating to detecting wildfires in Saskatchewan's wildfire management areas, but further work remains.

Starting in 2021, the Agency uses an IT system to track the receipt of annual wildfire prevention and preparedness plans from industrial and commercial operators (e.g., forestry and mining companies) who conduct activities in wildfire management areas of the province. However, it has not determined how many operators it expects to receive these plans from. As a result, it does not know how many plans it still needs to receive from operators.

Having incomplete information about operators' wildfire prevention and preparedness plans, including information about values-at-risk, increases the risk of the Agency not prioritizing its wildfire detection and suppression activities appropriately.¹

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

Under *The Wildfire Act*, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency is responsible for the prevention, detection, control, suppression, and investigation of wildfires within the province's wildfire management areas, including provincial forests.²

Provincial wildfire management areas include provincial forests, parkland, vacant Crown land, and every quarter section of land lying wholly or partly within 4.5 kilometres of the boundaries of a provincial forest.^{3,4}

The Operations Division within the Agency manages wildfires for the province. The Operations Division employs approximately 340 full-time equivalent employees including front-line staff (e.g., firefighters, pilots). The Operations Division has a Provincial Coordination Centre located in Prince Albert and four response centres (North, West, East and South) responsible for detecting and responding to wildfires in the province. An aviation branch, a logistics support branch and an emergency communications branch all support operational responses to wildfires across the Saskatchewan.⁵

The 2020 calendar year had 147 wildfires; the number of wildfires was below the 10-year average of 379 wildfires.⁶ The 2021 calendar year has seen 598 wildfires as at September 30, 2021.⁷ This number is well above the 10-year average.

¹ Values-at-risk include human life, communities, significant public and industrial infrastructure, commercial timber, remaining structures, natural resources, commercial/industrial operations, and wildlife habitats.

² On November 10, 2019, the Ministry of Environment transferred wildfire operations to the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency.

³ *The Wildfire Act*, s. 2(gg).

⁴ According to *The Wildfire Act*, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency is not responsible for detection on land within any city, town, village, hamlet, northern village, northern hamlet, northern settlement, regional park, and resort village or resort subdivision.

⁵ Information provided by Agency management.

⁶ *Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency, Annual Report for 2020–21*, p. 23.

⁷ Information provided by Agency management.



2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our second follow-up audit on the actions taken by the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency on the one recommendation originally made in our 2017 audit.

Our *2017 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 23, concluded that, for the 12-month period ending March 31, 2017, the Ministry of Environment had, other than the areas of our two recommendations, effective processes to detect wildfires in Saskatchewan's wildfire management areas.⁸

In our *2019 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 32, we concluded that the Ministry of Environment implemented one of the two recommendations from our initial audit in 2017.⁹ The Ministry of Environment transferred wildfire operations to the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency in November 2019.

To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Agency's progress toward meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. The Ministry of Environment agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

Our audit approach primarily included examining information in the Agency's IT system showing fire preparedness plans submitted by industrial and commercial operators along with discussions with management responsible for wildfire detection.¹⁰

3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATION

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at September 30, 2021, and the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency's actions up to that date.

3.1 Still Identifying All Operators Required to Submit Wildfire Prevention and Preparedness Plans

We recommended the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency (formerly the Ministry of Environment) actively seek wildfire prevention and preparedness information from industrial and commercial operators that they are required by law to submit. (*2017 Report – Volume 2*, p. 149, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement June 13, 2018)

Status—Partially Implemented

⁸ Find the original report regarding these recommendations at www.auditor.sk.ca/publications/public-reports. We reported the original audit work in *2017 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 23, pp. 143–158.

⁹ Find the original report regarding these recommendation at www.auditor.sk.ca/publications/public-reports. We reported the follow-up audit work findings for this recommendation in the *2019 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 32, pp. 267–268.

¹⁰ Section 2 of *The Wildfire Act* defines industrial and commercial operations as an activity carried out in connection with the operations of forestry; mining; oil and gas; public utilities; outfitting; peat-moss; railway; institutional camps; mineral exploration; and road construction and maintenance.

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency uses an IT system to track the receipt of wildfire prevention and preparedness plans from industrial and commercial operators. However, the Agency has not yet identified how many wildfire prevention and preparedness plans it expects to receive from operators. As a result, the Agency does not know how many plans it has not received.

The Wildfire Act (s.20) requires operators to submit wildfire prevention and preparedness plans to the Agency annually. These plans are to include key information, including values-at-risk, for each location (e.g., description of activities; number of people, structures, and equipment at the operation; key contact information; maps; methods to be used to reduce or prevent fire starts; measures to be taken to protect infrastructure and assets from a wildfire threat).¹¹ Wildfire prevention and preparedness plans from industrial and commercial operators are important as the plans contain information to help the Agency assess the risk of wildfires and to notify the operators in the event of wildfire threats.

The Agency requests operators submit plans via email.¹² Starting in 2021, the Agency saves those plans by year received in an IT application it uses to internally store, organize and share information (i.e., Sharepoint).

Our original performance audit and follow-up audit, in 2017 and 2019 respectively, found the Ministry of Environment had meetings with operators to inform them of the requirement to submit these plans. Based on those meetings, in 2019, the Ministry of Environment estimated it expected to receive wildfire prevention and preparedness plans from approximately 238 operators. The Agency has not conducted further work (e.g., re-canvass operators) to update or verify the accuracy of this estimate since assuming responsibility from the Ministry in 2019.

In 2017, operators submitted only 13 plans; in 2019, this number increased to 50 plans. As of September 23, 2021, the Agency received a total of 48 plans for the 2021 calendar year. While the Agency generally receives more plans each year, it does not currently know how many total plans it should receive from operators. As a result, it has not undertaken any follow-up actions for operators who have not submitted a plan as expected (e.g., followed up with operators to obtain plans, imposed penalties).¹³

Having incomplete information about operators' wildfire preparation and preparedness plans (including values-at-risk) increases the risk of the Agency not prioritizing its wildfire detection activities appropriately, and not developing suitable, related suppression strategies.

¹¹ Specific plan requirements are outlined in section 9(1) of *The Wildfire Regulations*.

¹² Operators can email plans to Agency officials or to the dedicated wildfire prevention and preparedness plan email address wppp@gov.sk.ca.

¹³ Section 22 (1) of *The Wildfire Act* allows for the suspension or restriction of any or all activities of an industrial or commercial operation until a wildfire and preparedness plan has been submitted and that plan meets the satisfaction of an Agency officer.

