

## Chapter 28

# Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency—Detecting Wildfires

### 1.0 MAIN POINTS

At October 2023, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency continued to work to address our one remaining recommendation made in 2017 relating to detecting wildfires.

*The Wildfire Act* requires industrial and commercial operators (e.g., forestry and mining companies) who conduct activities in wildfire management areas of the province to submit wildfire prevention and preparedness plans. These plans intend to prevent fatalities and injuries, and to reduce damage caused by wildfires. They also set out the location of operations and personnel, and related contact information to help the Agency notify operators in the event of wildfire threats.

While the Agency continued to track annual plans received from operators, it did not know whether all operators complied with the law and submitted their wildfire prevention and preparedness plans. The Agency was working with certain government ministries to document standardized practices to support development of these plans, and require submission of plans as part of licensing and permitting processes (e.g., timber licence agreements) to efficiently support safe operations in Saskatchewan.

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.<sup>1</sup> Wildfires can be costly and threaten lives and structures.

### 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. Provincial wildfire management areas include provincial forests, parkland, vacant Crown land, and every quarter section of land lying wholly or partly within 4.5 kilometers of the boundaries of a provincial forest.<sup>2,3</sup>

The Operations Division within the Agency manages wildfires for the province. The Division employs approximately 340 full-time equivalent employees including front-line staff (e.g., firefighters, pilots). The Division has a Provincial Coordination Centre located in Prince Albert and four response centres (North, West, East and South) responsible for

<sup>1</sup> Values-at-risk include human life, communities, significant public and industrial infrastructure, natural resource and commercial/industrial operations.

<sup>2</sup> *The Wildfire Act*, s.2(gg)

<sup>3</sup> According to *The Wildfire Act*, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency is not responsible for wildfire detection within any city, town, village, hamlet, northern village, northern hamlet, northern settlement, regional park, and resort village or resort subdivision.



detecting and responding to wildfires. An aviation branch, a logistics and support branch, and an emergency communications branch all support operational responses to wildfires across Saskatchewan.<sup>4</sup>

Saskatchewan experienced 444 wildfires (2021: 635) during the 2022 wildfire season.<sup>5</sup> At September 30, 2023, over 490 wildfires occurred in the 2023 wildfire season.<sup>6</sup> The 2021–23 wildfire seasons were above the 10-year average of 415 wildfires.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our third follow-up audit of management's actions on the one outstanding recommendation we first made in 2017.

Our *2017 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 23, concluded that, for the 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.<sup>8</sup> The Ministry of Environment wildfire operations branch transferred to the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency in November 2019. By 2021, the Agency implemented one recommendation and made some progress in implementing the second recommendation, but further work remained.<sup>9,10</sup>

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. Ministry of Environment management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

Our audit approach included discussions with Agency management. We also examined information showing fire preparedness plans submitted by industrial and commercial operators.<sup>11</sup>

## 3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATION

This section sets out the recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at October 2, 2023, and the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency's actions up to that date.

<sup>4</sup> Information provided by Agency management.

<sup>5</sup> Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency, *Annual Report for 2022–23*, pp. 22–23. Of 444 wildfires, there were 238 human-caused wildfires (54%) and 206 lightning-caused wildfires (46%).

<sup>6</sup> [www.saskpublicsafety.ca/emergencies-and-response/wildfire-status](http://www.saskpublicsafety.ca/emergencies-and-response/wildfire-status) (2 October 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency, *Annual Report for 2022–23*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> *2017 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 23*, pp. 143–158.

<sup>9</sup> *2019 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 32*, pp. 265–268.

<sup>10</sup> *2021 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 36*, pp. 261–263.

<sup>11</sup> Section 2 of *The Wildfire Act* defines industrial and commercial operations as an activity carried on 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.

### 3.1 Operator Wildfire Prevention and Preparedness Plans Needed

***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

At October 2023, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency tracked annual wildfire prevention and preparedness plans received from industrial and commercial operators conducting activities in wildfire management areas during the wildfire season, but did not know whether all such operators provided plans as required by law under *The Wildfire Act*.

*The Wildfire Act* (s.20) requires operators to submit wildfire prevention and preparedness plans to the Agency. 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; and measures to be taken to protect infrastructure and assets from a wildfire threat).<sup>12</sup> Wildfire prevention and preparedness plans from industrial and commercial operators help the Agency assess the risk of wildfires and to notify operators in the event of wildfire threats.

The Agency meets with industry and provides information on its website to explain requirements, as well as shares contact information to support operators with their plans. Operators submit plans via email and the Agency stores those plans by year in its IT systems.<sup>13</sup>

In 2019, an estimated 238 operators were expected to submit wildfire prevention and preparedness plans. By September 2023, the Agency had not conducted further work (e.g., re-canvassing operators) to update or verify the accuracy of this estimate. It was working with certain ministries to share information (e.g., permits) about operator locations to support wildfire strategies and to document standardized practices that support development of these plans.

Over the past three years, the Agency received from industrial and commercial operators 48 plans for 2021, 31 plans for 2022, and 34 plans for 2023 as of September 30, 2023. Based on its review of the plans, the Agency requested operators amend plans as needed to meet legislative requirements. However, the Agency did not know whether additional operators should have submitted plans but did not. As a result, it had not undertaken follow-up with or enforcement actions against any operators who have not submitted a plan as required by law (e.g., followed up with operators to obtain plans, imposed fines or penalties). The Agency has a compliance and enforcement unit that would enable it to carry out such actions.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Section 9(1) of *The Wildfire Regulations* outlines specific plan requirements.

<sup>13</sup> Operators can email plans to Agency officials or to the dedicated wildfire prevention and preparedness plan email address [wppp@gov.sk.ca](mailto:wppp@gov.sk.ca).

<sup>14</sup> 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 plans meet the satisfaction of an Agency officer.



Agency management advised us they are working with government ministries to include submission of plans as part of issuing licences or permits to commercial and industrial operators in designated areas, as well as to notify the Agency when these ministries issue these licences or permits. For example, the Ministry of Energy and Resources is working with forestry operators to include these plans as part of timber licence agreements. Including these requirements as part of existing processes makes it easier for operators to comply and is an efficient way for the Agency to collect plans from operators.

Having processes to ensure all industrial and commercial operators submit wildfire preparation and preparedness plans reduces the risk the Agency may not prioritize its wildfire detection activities appropriately or develop suitable, related suppression strategies.