Chapter 5
Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency—Resource Planning for Wildfire Response

1.0 Main Points

For many people and communities, wildfires can cause significant impact such as the destruction of homes and possibly whole communities. Wildfires can incur sizable, long-term costs to public resources beyond firefighting costs, including infrastructure damage and economic losses. During the 2025 wildfire season, 510 wildfires burned 3 million hectares in Saskatchewan and cost over $350 million for wildfire response. The response required an additional 916 personnel from outside the province that costed between two to five times more than employed firefighters.

Effective wildfire response requires access to the right equipment, personnel, and supplies at the right time and in the right location. We audited the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency's processes to plan for the resources required (e.g., personnel, equipment) to respond to wildfires and found it had effective processes, except it needs to:

- **Develop robust resource plans (i.e., optimal resources, staff recruitment and retention, capital asset management) for wildfire response.** The Agency relies on key resources (e.g., firefighters, aircraft) for wildfire response but has not adequately determined optimal levels needed before each wildfire season, increasing costs and its reliance on contracted resources. In 2025, the Agency spent about $26.3 million (2024: $1.9 million) for contracted resources obtained through mutual aid agreements.

- **Analyze the effectiveness of its wildfire resource use, including timeliness and cost-benefit of contracted resources** (e.g., helicopters, aircraft, personnel). We found the Agency neither assesses costs nor consistently tracks when contracted resources are requested and received. We found it took an average of 15 days for contracted personnel to arrive and deploy to fires in 2025. The Agency also paid about 35% more on short-term helicopter contracts than long-term, suggesting it could have potentially saved about $500,000 by using an additional long-term contract.

- **Prepare its annual budget based on robust resource plans and include all expected wildfire response costs.** Actual variable costs related to wildfire response exceeded the Agency's initial budget by more than $70 million a year over each of the last three years, demonstrating budgets do not reasonably reflect the expected costs of wildfire response each year.

- **Set and monitor an initial-attack success measure showing the extent of wildfires kept below 10 hectares in size, a key indicator of effective wildfire suppression.**

- **Work with communities identified as having higher wildfire risk to make sure community wildfire preparedness plans exist.** We found the Agency identified 89 northern communities in areas at higher risk of wildfires and 21 of those communities have not completed a wildfire preparedness plan.

The Agency also needs to work with the Ministry of Finance to revisit the funding model for wildfire operations, formally monitor and report to its Board on the implementation of recommendations from annual wildfire season reviews, and centrally track firefighter training completion.

Investing in strong resource planning and preparedness can improve response effectiveness.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Under *The Wildfire Act,* the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency is responsible for the prevention, detection, control, suppression, investigation of, and preparedness for, wildfires within provincial wildfire management areas. These areas include approximately 30 million hectares of land and forest mainly in the northern part of the province, and all 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.[1]

2.1 Responding to Wildfires in Saskatchewan

In Saskatchewan, local authorities (e.g., municipalities, First Nations) are responsible in leading the first response to a wildfire, except where a wildfire occurs within provincial wildfire management areas under the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency's responsibility.

Local authorities can request resources and assistance from the Provincial Government (Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency) when needed (e.g., local resources and capabilities are overwhelmed). The Agency can also seek federal or international support if its resources become overwhelmed. See **Figure 1** for the parties involved in responding to wildfires.

Figure 1—Parties Involved in Responding to Wildfires

Source: The Office of the Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan.

The type of Agency response varies depending on the location and behaviour of a wildfire. There may be fires, due to their proximity and lack of threat to the public or infrastructure, that may not require full suppression response. The Agency will assess, monitor, and evaluate these wildfires on an ongoing basis so fires are not left unattended. The Agency prioritizes response based on values at risk—human life, communities, major public infrastructure and significant industrial infrastructure, commercial timber, and remaining values including remote structures and natural resources.

[1] *The Wildfire Act*, s. 2(gg).

Part of wildfire preparedness includes resource planning—the focus of our audit. Key resources include trained and qualified personnel, as well as equipment (e.g., aircraft, heavy equipment, pumps, hoses, communication equipment) being available at the right time and in the right place to allow for effective wildfire response.

The Agency's Operations Division manages wildfire operations. The Division has about 757 staff (367 full-time equivalent [FTE] positions), which include front-line firefighters, logistics teams, pilots, and command personnel. The Division operates a Provincial Coordination Centre in Prince Albert and three geographic response centres across the province (north centre—located in La Ronge, west centre—located in Buffalo Narrows, and east centre—located in Prince Albert) all responsible for responding to wildfires (see **Section 6.0** for a map with the response centres). There are four branches dedicated to air operations, land operations, logistics, and emergency communications that support wildfire operations and fall under the Operations Division.

During particularly intense fire seasons, over 1,000 trained firefighters may be deployed, combining provincial fire crews, local municipal fire departments, contracted crews, and community firefighters (e.g., First Nations).

2.2 Impact of Wildfires in Saskatchewan

Wildfires are a natural part of Saskatchewan's environment, but in recent years, their scale, frequency, and impact have grown significantly. Wildfires can start in one of two ways (i.e., natural causes such as lightning or human causes such as from a bonfire) and Saskatchewan's northern forest is particularly fire-prone due to its fire fuel, dry conditions, and lightning activity.[2] Climate change (e.g., altered precipitation patterns) increases these risks, contributing to longer fire seasons, hotter temperatures, and more volatile weather patterns making fires harder to predict and control. As a result, wildfires are not only ecological events, but also major social and economic challenges for the province.

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency reported 510 wildfires across the province between January 2025 and December 2025 that burned almost 3.0 million hectares. As noted in **Figure 2**, Saskatchewan's 10-year annual average of 418 wildfires burned about 777,000 hectares at a cost of $85.2 million.

Figure 2—Number of Wildfires, Hectares Burned and Costs from 2016–25

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Average
Wildfires	364	353	416	243	147	635	443	471	595	510	**418**
Hectares (000s)	248	399	119	48	42	865	265	1,868	936	2,979	**777**
Wildfire Costs (in millions)[A]	$24.3	$46.8	$38.1	$11.9	$24.2	$110.0	$51.0	$98.5	$95.2	$351.6	**$85.2**

Source: Adapted from Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency's 2025 Wildfire Statistics Report. Statistics reflect amounts from January to December each year.
[A] In 2025 dollars. Per the Agency's 2025 Wildfire Statistics Report, wildfire season costs prior to 2025 (2016–24) were calculated using the Bank of Canada inflation calculator as of March 11, 2026.

[2] Fire fuel is any plant matter, or grasses, trees, shrubs, and other living and non-living materials such as houses and other structures containing combustible materials keeping a fire going. www.canadawildfire.org/wildfirefacts (9 December 2025).

For many people and communities, the effects of wildfires can cause significant impact such as the destruction of homes and possibly whole communities. Wildfire evacuations disrupt lives, separate families, impact mental health and wellbeing, and put substantial strain on local services and emergency responders. Communities affected by evacuations also incur expenses for transportation, temporary lodging, and long-term recovery.

Wildfires also significantly impact the environment. While fire plays a natural role in regenerating forests, extreme and frequent wildfires can damage ecosystems beyond their ability to recover quickly. Large burns can destroy wildlife habitats and alter water quality. In some areas, repeated burning can shift the type of vegetation that grows back, potentially transforming ecosystems over time.

Further, wildfires can incur sizable, disruptive, and long-term costs to public resources beyond firefighting costs, including infrastructure damage, highway and supply route disruption, and economic losses in industries such as forestry, tourism, agriculture, and mining.[3]

A critical factor in managing these risks is strong resource planning. Effective wildfire response depends on having the right equipment, personnel, and supplies available at the right time and in the right location. This includes resources such as aircraft, fire engines, pumps, protective gear and communication equipment, as well as logistics systems that ensure fuel, food, and medical supplies reach crews in remote areas. Adequate staffing (both full-time and seasonal) is essential to meet demand during peak fire months, while ongoing training helps ensure teams can operate safely in complex fire environments.

Robust resource planning also helps anticipate supply chain challenges, optimize deployment of resources across Saskatchewan, and maintain readiness even during high wildfire activity seasons.

Investing in strong resource planning and preparedness can improve response effectiveness, reduce long-term costs, and better protect communities, people, and the environment.

3.0 Audit Conclusion

We concluded, for the period ending March 31, 2026, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency had effective processes to plan for the resources required (e.g., personnel, equipment) to respond to wildfires other than the following areas.

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency needs to:

- **Develop robust resource plans (i.e., optimal resources, staff recruitment and retention, capital asset management) for wildfire response**
- **Analyze the effectiveness of its wildfire resource use, including timeliness and cost-benefit of contracted resources**

[3] Canadian Council of Forest Ministers. (2024). *Canadian Wildland Fire Prevention and Mitigation Strategy, Taking Action Together*, p. 7.

- **Prepare its annual budget based on robust resource plans and include all expected wildfire response costs**
- **Work with the Ministry of Finance to revisit the funding model for wildfire operations**
- **Set and monitor an initial-attack success measure**
- **Work with communities identified as having higher wildfire risk to make sure community wildfire preparedness plans exist**
- **Monitor implementation of recommendations from formal wildfire season reviews, and report implementation status to its Board**
- **Centrally track and monitor firefighter training completion**

Figure 3—Audit Objective, Criteria, and Approach

Audit Objective:

To assess whether the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency had effective processes, for the period ending March 31, 2026, to plan for the resources required (e.g., personnel, equipment) to respond to wildfires.

The audit focused on the Agency's processes to prepare for wildfires (pre-response preparedness), rather than on its response and recovery efforts.

Audit Criteria:

Processes to:

1. **Establish resource plans**
   - Conduct risk assessments (e.g., weather and wildfire hazard forecasting) to identify areas at risk of wildfires
   - Identify resources needed (e.g., capacity assessment, gap analysis) based on wildfire risks and prevention measures
   - Set short- and long-term resource plans (e.g., capital plans, operational plans)
   - Partner with other agencies (e.g., municipalities, First Nations, Federal Government, international agencies) to obtain resources
2. **Allocate appropriate resources**
   - Determine financial resources required
   - Have qualified personnel (e.g., firefighters, pilots) available timely
   - Make adequate equipment (e.g., aircraft, pumps, heavy equipment) available timely, including conducting required maintenance
3. **Revisit resource plans**
   - Track and analyze resource utilization
   - Adjust resource plans based on analysis (e.g., historical experience, emerging wildfire risks)
   - Communicate results and lessons learned with partners, senior management, and the Board

Audit Approach:

To conduct this audit, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency's processes, we used the above criteria based on our related work, review of literature including reports of other auditors, and consultations with management and an independent consultant. Agency management agreed with the above criteria.

We examined the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency's policies and procedures along with other key documents (e.g., operational and financial plans, capital plan, training requirements, post-season reviews) relating to wildfire resource planning. We interviewed relevant Agency staff responsible for resource planning for wildfire response. We tested a sample of resource contracts, maintenance records, and training records. In addition, we used an independent consultant with subject matter expertise in the area to help us identify good practice and to assess the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency's processes.

4.0 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Wildfire Risk Areas Identified, But Not All High-Risk Communities Have Preparedness Plans

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency identifies areas at risk of wildfires through several ways (e.g., regional operational response plans). However, the Agency did not receive completed wildfire preparedness plans for all northern communities in higher wildfire risk areas, which limits its understanding of additional risk areas and potential response needs.

The Agency uses various inputs to prepare its wildfire season resource planning including regional operational response plans, spring outlook reports, SaskDispatch (IT system), and other sources (e.g., post-fire season reviews). These inputs help the Agency identify areas at higher risk of wildfires and effectively plan for wildfire response.

4.1.1 Regional Operational Response Plans

The Agency has three geographic response centres across the province—north, west, and east regions (see **Section 6.0**), all north of Prince Albert in Saskatchewan's heavily forested lands. The response centres coordinate the Agency's operations to help ensure effective response to wildfires. Each centre includes emergency response teams, incident command teams, and various logistic services to direct the deployment of firefighters and equipment across the province once wildfire season starts.

The Agency also mapped the province into 12 protection areas and located 17 protection bases throughout these protection areas that house key response resources such as firefighters. There are 16 protection bases located in the northern part of the province (north of Prince Albert) which is where the majority of wildfires occur. There is also one base located near Cypress Hills Provincial Park.

Each year, the Agency's three response centres develop regional operational response plans, including plans for each protection area, to help prepare for the upcoming wildfire season. **Figure 4** sets out key information included in each of the plans. We found these plans aligned with good practice.

Figure 4—Key Information Included in Regional Operational Response Plans

General geological information and area fire history: includes overall size of protection areas, area of forested lands, brief fire history (e.g., typical number of wildfires each year, typical scale of fire severity)
Values at risk: identifies communities, key industry operators (e.g., mines, timber/forestry operations), and public utilities at risk due to wildfires
Infrastructure: includes information on key infrastructure such as detection towers, weather stations, and aviation landing fields (e.g., municipal airport)
Resources: includes contact information for staff at fire bases and contract crews, available equipment (e.g., vehicles, boats), available aviation resources (e.g., helicopter services, aviation fuel), contact information for transportation services (e.g., taxi, bus), contract equipment (e.g., bulldozer) companies, accommodations (e.g., hotels), and other miscellaneous supply resources
Fire management: summarizes procedures for responding to wildfire incidents including information such as prioritization of assets, chain of command for responding to incidents, and communication requirements

Source: Adapted from Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency operational response plans.

Plans outline higher risks and challenges such as increased potential for human-caused fires (e.g., due to increasing demand from recreational activities, rural residential developments), certain industry infrastructure at risk due to unburned forest fuels around a site, and location of values at risk that may cause logistical problems due to distance.

Having such plans helps the Agency identify key resources available and the values at risk in each response area which in turn will help guide its actions to protect lives and property.

4.1.2 Community Wildfire Preparedness Plans

Communities are responsible for having community wildfire preparedness plans in place. The Agency has community engagement officers who work with northern communities in areas of higher wildfire risk to help those communities develop wildfire preparedness plans.[4] Preparedness plans cover key areas such as:

- Location overview (e.g., maps that outline types of fuel sources such as boreal spruce, aspen, and pine)
- Factors affecting wildfire behaviour (e.g., fuel types, typical weather patterns)
- Values at risk (e.g., critical infrastructure, structures, campgrounds)
- Structure protection strategies and tactics (e.g., community's direct attack options such as deploying the local fire department)
- Key contacts (e.g., community fire/rescue, Agency personnel such as protection officer and fire base supervisor)

Preparedness plans include risks such as wildfires generating significant embers that may affect communities and parts of communities at higher risk due to adjacent forest fuels backing on to certain community properties. The plans note structure protection strategies and tactics that should be immediately considered for these areas in the event of a wildfire ignition in the vicinity.

The Agency considers these plans to help it identify areas at risk where it may be called upon to respond. Communities are responsible for the first response to a wildfire, but when they become overwhelmed (e.g., local resources and capabilities exhausted), they can request resources and assistance from the Agency when needed.

We found the Agency identified 89 northern communities in areas at higher risk of wildfires and 21 of those communities have not completed a wildfire preparedness plan.

The Agency's 2025–29 Strategic Plan set a target for these communities to develop wildfire preparedness plans by 2030. Not completing these plans sooner increases the risk communities will not be prepared to respond effectively to wildfires should they occur.

[4] A preparedness plan is not a plan to help communities manage and reduce risk of wildfire damage to buildings and infrastructure. Such resources exist (e.g., FireSmart www.saskpublicsafety.ca/At-Home/firesmart) but the scope of our audit did not look at prevention activities.

Not ensuring communities have completed wildfire preparedness plans limits the Agency's ability to identify areas at risk and where it may be called in to respond when communities become overwhelmed in their own response.

1. **We recommend the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency work with communities identified as having higher wildfire risk to make sure they have community wildfire preparedness plans.**

4.1.3 Spring Outlook Reports

Each spring, the Agency obtains information from other provincial (e.g., Water Security Agency) and federal (e.g., Environment and Climate Change Canada) government agencies to help prepare its spring outlook report for an upcoming wildfire season, such as:

- Previous winter weather (e.g., precipitation/snow level, overall temperature averages)
- Current weather patterns (e.g., El Niño) and projected precipitation levels
- Expected spring and summer weather conditions
- Spring run-off (e.g., impact of snow run-off that occurs each spring)

It considers these reports to help it determine the likelihood of higher or lower wildfire activity, as well as determine areas of the province at higher wildfire risk. For example, we found the 2025 spring outlook report highlighted higher than normal temperatures and lower precipitation (e.g., high-risk wildfire indicators) particularly in the northern response area leading up to the 2025 wildfire season.

4.1.4 Other Resources

The Agency conducted a formal review of its 2024 wildfire season and contracted a third party to review its response to the 2025 wildfire season. In addition, the Agency also holds bi-annual meetings with wildfire management staff and senior management to discuss areas for improvement. See **Section 4.10** for further information on the Agency's formal reviews of wildfire seasons.

In addition, we found staff within the Agency are members of various committees and working groups organized by the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre. For example, the Centre has a Resource Management Committee which oversees the Coordination, Aviation, Training, and Equipment working groups. We found during these meetings each jurisdiction provides updates on results of previous fire seasons.

Using operational plans, spring outlook reports, and reviews of its fire seasons help the Agency identify areas at higher wildfire risk when planning for wildfire response. We found these were good sources to identify risks and available resources, however we were unable to see how the Agency changed its resource plans based on these sources (see **Section 4.2** for the need to sufficiently identify resource needs).

4.1.5 SaskDispatch IT System

During the wildfire season (i.e., typically April to September each year), the Agency uses SaskDispatch, an IT system, as its primary tool to track wildfire activity (e.g., current wildfires) and resource location and allocation (e.g., aircraft and firefighters assigned to each wildfire). The Dispatch system is frequently updated by the Agency's dispatch team to clearly convey where current wildfires are burning and where resources have been deployed. The Dispatch system supports the Agency in managing and coordinating response to wildfires as it helps show whether resources are allocated effectively and allows the Agency to know where staff are located from a safety perspective.

The Agency uses Canadian Forest Fire Danger Ratings, which are integrated into its SaskDispatch IT system, to assess current wildfire danger and predict fire behaviour.[5] The ratings consider items such a topography, fuels (e.g., types and density of forest), and forecasted weather to predict key fire characteristics such as ease of ignition, rate of spread, and difficulty to control. We observed this information is included in the SaskDispatch IT system. The Dispatch system allows the Agency to establish priorities for pre-positioning and deployment of fire suppression resources based on evaluation of current/predicted fire activity and firefighting resource status and availability, and communicate these priorities through command channels for implementation.

We found the SaskDispatch IT system continually monitors wildfire risk and current wildfire incidents. Doing so supports the Agency in managing and coordinating responses to wildfires.

4.2 Resource Needs Not Sufficiently Identified Prior to a Wildfire Season

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency uses a variety of key resources (e.g., firefighters, aircraft, equipment) to respond to wildfires. However, it does not sufficiently identify the optimal resources needed prior to the start of a wildfire season to support efficient and effective wildfire response.

When a wildfire starts, the Agency uses a variety of techniques to suppress it, including direct attack, indirect attack, and aerial support. Direct attack involves applying water or fire retardant directly to the fire and using hand tools to extinguish flames. Indirect attack involves firefighters building firelines ahead of a fire to create a barrier preventing its spread. Deploying firefighters and equipment to a fire as quickly as possible is essential, requiring an understanding of how many, and where, fires might burn each year and planning for enough resources to fight them while trying to minimize escaped fires (e.g., those fires that burn more than 100 hectares in size).

The Agency uses the following key resources (ground-based and aerial) to respond to wildfires.

[5] The Canadian Forest Fire Danger Rating System is a universal standard in Canada to evaluate current and future wildfire risk using scientific models to assess factors that impact wildfire activity.

Key Personnel

As noted in **Section 4.1**, each year the Agency prepares regional operational response plans that include some information on the number of personnel (e.g., firefighters) available to combat wildfires. However, the Agency has not assessed and determined the optimal number of personnel (e.g., firefighters, pilots) required to effectively and efficiently combat wildfires. It continues to plan for the same number of key personnel each year even though the number and magnitude of fires have grown (see **Figure 2**). For example, in 2022, 443 wildfires burned 265,000 hectares compared to 510 wildfires that burned almost 3 million hectares in 2025. In the event the Agency requires more personnel than planned in each wildfire season, it uses mutual aid resource agreements with other wildfire agencies to bring in contracted personnel (e.g., more firefighters), which can have higher cost implications (see **Section 4.7**).

We found the Agency has not made any significant changes to planned key wildfire personnel over the last three wildfire seasons and continues to experience vacancies in each of the key positions. See **Figure 5** for a summary of key positions and vacancies. For example, the Agency planned for 38 pilots in 2023, 2024, and 2025. Also, while the Agency planned for 37 aircraft maintenance engineers, it had 31 positions filled in 2025. All positions are seasonal (i.e., called back early to train and be available for the upcoming fire season) except aircraft maintenance engineers who work all year long.

Figure 5—Key Personnel Available to Respond to Wildfires (2024–26 Wildfire Seasons)

Key Personnel	2024		2025		2026[C]	
	Positions	Vacancies	Positions	Vacancies	Positions	Vacancies
Pilots	38	1	38	2	38	3
Type 1 Firefighters[A]	227	9	226	19	226	23
Type 2 Firefighters[A]	410	-	410	-	410	-
Aircraft Maintenance Engineers	31	2	37	6	36	5
Air Attack Officers[B]	9	3	10	2	10	2

Source: Adapted from information provided by the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency.
[A] Type 1 firefighters are employed by the Agency whereas Type 2 firefighters are contracted through formal agreements with First Nations organizations and northern communities. Type 1 firefighters are highly trained for handling complex fire situations, while Type 2 have more basic training but are still essential for firefighting operations.
[B] Air attack officers are aerial wildfire suppression specialists who direct (e.g., where and when to waterbomb a fire) firefighting aircraft from a command plane.
[C] Data as of January 2026.

Management indicated the Agency is encountering challenges in hiring these skilled and specialized personnel to fill vacancies. To try to address some of these shortages, the Agency hired six aircraft maintenance engineer apprentices.

We also found for the past three years the Agency attended various career fairs across Saskatchewan and other provinces to attempt to recruit staff for the Agency. It plans to attend more career fairs in 2026–27. However, we found the Agency does not have targeted strategies for its specific positions key to wildfire response (e.g., Type 1 firefighters, pilots). For example, it could consider developing relationships with training institutions for pilots and increasing awareness of firefighter careers at high schools.

Developing a recruitment and retention plan targeting these key positions can help the Agency attract and retain staff to help ensure it has the optimal number of personnel required to effectively and efficiently combat wildfires.

2. **We recommend the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency develop a targeted recruitment and retention plan for key personnel (i.e., Type 1 firefighters, pilots, aircraft maintenance engineers, air attack officers) responsible for responding to wildfires in Saskatchewan.**

In addition, the Agency needs to determine the optimal number of staff required (by position) to effectively combat wildfires, as well as the optimal mix of internal and contracted resources. We found the Agency has not conducted a gap analysis comparing optimal staffing to staffing available (including consideration of staff overtime). While the Agency tries to fill any resource shortfalls by bringing in external resources from other jurisdictions (see **Section 4.3** for resource sharing agreements), doing so increases the risk of not having resources available when needed, which may negatively impact the Agency's resources (e.g., staff burnout) and its effectiveness in responding to wildfires (e.g., fires growing in size making them harder to fight).

Equipment (e.g., helicopters, heavy equipment, aircraft)

The Agency uses short- and long-term contracts to obtain additional wildfire equipment resources (e.g., helicopters, heavy equipment) to help its wildfire response. We found the Agency has not assessed the cost and availability of these contracts to determine an optimal mix of short- and long-term contracts needed (see **Section 4.8** for further details on the Agency's use of contracts).

The Agency also owns a fleet of 17 aircraft and accesses other needed aircraft through its resource sharing agreements. We found it has not assessed the optimal mix of having its own fleet and the cost and utilization of contracted aircraft.

As wildfire magnitude and severity continue to increase, determining the optimal number of wildfire management positions required, as well as the optimal mix of aircraft and contracted equipment to fight wildfires can help the Agency respond effectively while managing costs.

3. **We recommend the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency determine the optimal number of resources (i.e., personnel, equipment, aircraft) it requires to effectively and efficiently respond to wildfires.**

Supplies Inventory

The Agency sufficiently identified required levels of certain key supplies inventory (e.g., hoses, pumps) to effectively respond to wildfires; it had sufficient inventory available during the 2025 wildfire season.

The Agency informally establishes inventory levels required by April 1 (fire season start-up requirements). Management indicated the Agency determined these start-up levels based on analyzing inventory from the last five to six years to determine optimal levels needed heading into a wildfire season. The Agency was unable to provide evidence of this analysis.

For example, the Agency plans to have 800 pumps and 25,000 hoses available April 1 of each year. Our testing found, for each of the last two years, the Agency met its informal start-up requirements for pumps and hoses.

During the unprecedented 2025 wildfire season, we found the Agency did not run out of key inventory such as pumps and hoses. Management indicated when levels started to get low during that wildfire season, the Agency used its external resource sharing agreements (i.e., contracted resources) to secure additional pumps and hoses as backup. We found it secured 100 additional pumps and 3,000 hoses. The Agency did not need these additional pumps and hoses and returned the inventory to its partners (at no cost).

To help ensure the Agency has key inventory available for future wildfire seasons and in the event of staff turnover, we suggest it formalize its start-up requirements along with written rationale for determining quantities needed.

Capital Assets (e.g., aircraft, IT systems)

The Agency has a long-term capital plan for the Agency as a whole (not just related to wildfires) setting out planned capital investments over the next 10 years. It uses a capital committee that meets regularly (i.e., approximately monthly) to review current and upcoming capital projects and identify new risks, with members representing different areas within the Agency (e.g., land operations, air operations, logistics).

Each year, the Agency also sets out an annual capital plan including the current state of assets (e.g., age of IT assets).[6] However, we found the plan lacks other key information such as the condition, service life expectancy, and functionality of its assets. For example, we found three of the four land-based air tanker planes owned by the Agency are approximately 70 years old. The Agency plans to replace these three aircraft by 2027–28. We also found all six CL-215T planes (water-scooping air tankers) are about 40 years old, but the Agency has not established service life expectancy estimations and when they will need to be replaced. Two of these planes have not been available since November 2024 due to repairs.

The Agency also identified IT systems at risk of downtime, such as the SaskDispatch IT system, and is currently evaluating service life expectancy for all its IT systems.

Not having a robust asset management plan increases the risk the Agency may not make informed decisions about resources needed to effectively respond to wildfires. It also makes it difficult for the Agency to monitor the condition and performance of its key assets (i.e., aircraft, IT systems) which increases the risk those assets may not be available when needed (e.g., unplanned downtime, increased maintenance).

[6] Annual and long-term capital plans form part of the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency's budget request (see **Section 4.4** about its budget process).

4. **We recommend the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency develop a capital asset management plan for its key wildfire response assets (i.e., IT systems, aircraft).**

4.3 Resource Sharing Partnerships Established with Other Agencies

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency collaborates and works with other provincial, federal, and international wildfire management agencies to obtain resources required to respond to wildfires.

The Agency established multiple agreements to share resources (e.g., equipment, aircraft, personnel such as firefighters) from other jurisdictions in responding to wildfires. Key agreements in place at March 2026 include:

- **Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre (CIFFC) Mutual Aid Resources Sharing Agreement:** CIFFC is a federal agency that coordinates mutual aid (such as resource sharing) between the provinces and territories.[7] CIFFC also coordinates most international resource sharing with other countries such as the United States, Australia, Mexico, and South Africa.

- **Northwest Wildland Fire Protection Agreement**: includes Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Northwest Territories, Yukon, Alaska, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington.

- **Great Plains Interstate Fire Compact**: includes Saskatchewan, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Nebraska, and Kansas.

- **Northern Emergency Management Assistance Compact**: includes Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Alberta, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, Pennsylvania, New York, and Wisconsin.

We reviewed these agreements and found each appropriately set out each parties' responsibilities (e.g., costs related to equipment repair or replacement, notice of recall of equipment or personnel) and rates to use resources (e.g., Type 1 firefighters, aircraft). Rates vary depending on the jurisdiction resources are coming from.

As shown in **Figure 6**, the Agency used three agreements to obtain resources (46 requests filled) during the 2025 wildfire season (2024: seven requests; 2023: one request). We found the Agency utilized resources from British Columbia, Quebec, Prince Edward Island, Australia, Washington State, Arizona, and Mexico in 2025.

[7] The Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre is a federally incorporated not-for-profit corporation which is owned and operated by the federal, provincial, and territorial agencies responsible for wildland fire management in Canada. The Federal Government contributes one-third of the Centre's base operating costs and the remaining two-thirds of the base costs plus 100% of collaborative projects are funded by the provinces and territories. ciffc.ca/about/ (11 May 2026).

Figure 6—External Resource Requests Filled for the 2023–25 Wildfire Seasons

Agency Providing Resources	Resource	2023 Resources Received	2024 Resources Received	2025 Resources Received
Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre	Personnel, aircraft, and equipment (e.g., hoses)	2 aircraft	112 personnel, 3 aircraft, 1 weather forecaster	823 personnel, 10 aircraft, 3,000 hoses, 100 pumps, 100 pump kits, and 75 sprinklers
Northwest Wildland Fire Protection Agreement	Personnel and aircraft	None	None	52 personnel and 2 aircraft
Great Plains Interstate Fire Compact	Personnel	None	None	41 personnel

Source: Adapted from information provided by the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency.

Management indicated it cost the Agency about $26.3 million to obtain resources from its resource sharing partners in 2025 (2024: $1.9 million; 2023: $521,000). The Agency was able to provide resources (e.g., firefighters) to other jurisdictions in 2023 and 2024 and it received compensation as outlined in mutual aid agreements.

The Agency also has two agreements with First Nations organizations (i.e., Prince Albert Grand Council and Meadow Lake Tribal Council) and 15 agreements with northern Saskatchewan communities (e.g., Cumberland House, Buffalo Narrows) to provide Type 2 firefighters to combat wildfires.[8] We reviewed each type of agreement and found they clearly set out expectations including availability expectations (e.g., number of weeks), training requirements, and compensation. During 2025, the Agency used approximately 400 Type 2 firefighters from various First Nations organizations and northern communities to assist in fighting wildfires in Saskatchewan.

Having effective partnership agreements with other agencies provides the Agency with access to additional resources when its own resources are not sufficient, which reduces the risk of insufficient resources available to respond to wildfires.

4.4 Budgets Not Based on Robust Resource Plans

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency does not prepare its annual budget requests based on robust resource plans. In addition, it does not include the full planned costs of wildfire response in its budget requests, resulting in a significant amount of its funding approved by the Legislative Assembly (e.g., through supplementary estimates) after already incurring wildfire costs due to the current funding model.

4.4.1 Financial Plans (Budgets) For the Agency

The Agency develops two different budgets each year—a capital budget and an operating budget that include costs related to wildfires as well as other areas of responsibility (e.g., disaster assistance for flooding events). It uses these budgets to submit funding requests to the Ministry of Community Safety (see **Section 4.4.2** discussing the funding model).

[8] Type 2 firefighters are primarily used on sustained action fires and may also assist Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency firefighters (i.e., Type 1) on the initial response to new wildfires.

Capital Budget

As noted in **Section 4.2**, the Agency's capital committee meets throughout the year to determine capital investments the Agency needs to pursue. It also updates its long-term capital plan annually to track long-term cost forecasts. The Agency requests a base capital budget each year to address smaller capital projects such as improvements or additions to existing facilities and infrastructure (e.g., generator for a hangar, upgrades to IT systems). It typically requested and received base capital budgets of $4.0 million in recent years. For 2026–27, the Agency's requested increase to the base capital budget of $1.5 million was denied (e.g., increases were for enhancements to firefighting camps such as bunkhouses).

The Agency also requests capital funding for larger projects that fall outside of the base capital budget. Recent examples include purchasing four airplanes to replace its current fleet of 70-year-old Convair 580As for just over $187 million over the span of four years, which was approved for capital funding beginning in 2025–26. The Agency also requested about $6.5 million in 2026–27 for the replacement of values lost at the La Ronge tanker base (e.g., sleeping quarters, flight simulator) and the Lower Fishing Lake protection base (e.g., kitchen, bunkhouse) during the 2025 wildfires.

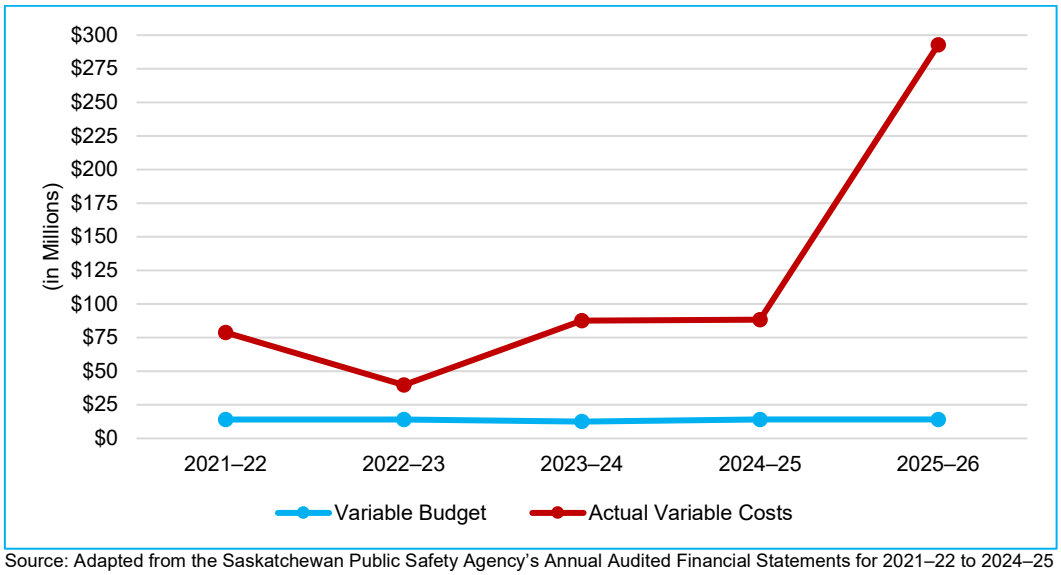
Operating Budget

The Agency's operating budget covers day-to-day operations (e.g., salaries, maintenance) and includes both a fixed and a variable component. The fixed component contains fixed costs like salaries for permanent staff and equipment maintenance, while the variable component includes fluctuating costs that depend on the number and types of wildfires (e.g., number of retardant dumps, contracted resources, short-term helicopter contracts, overtime paid to firefighters).

Over the last five years, the overall operating budget for the Agency did not change significantly (i.e., $76.8 million in 2022–23 compared to $76.3 million for 2026–27) even though certain wildfire related costs (e.g., airplane parts) increased substantially.

The variable component of the Agency's operating budget covers costs specific to address varying wildfire response. Over the last five years, the variable component amount of the Agency's approved budget ranged from $12.5 million to $14.1 million (set at $14.1 million for the 2026 wildfire season). As shown in **Figure 7**, actual variable costs relating to wildfires exceeded budgets in each of the last five years (e.g., actual variable costs exceeded budget by more than $70 million a year over the last three years) yet the Agency has made no significant changes to its variable budget request to account for consistently high variable wildfire costs each year.

Figure 7—Wildfire Variable Budget Compared to Actual Costs for 2021–25 Wildfire Seasons



Source: Adapted from the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency's Annual Audited Financial Statements for 2021–22 to 2024–25 and draft financial statements for 2025–26.

While the Agency ultimately received required funding for its wildfire operations (see **Figure 8** for total Agency operating funding approved), its operating budgets do not reasonably reflect the expected costs of wildfire response each year. The Agency included some information on average actual variable costs from the past three years in its 2026–27 budget submission to the Ministry of Community Safety, but it placed this information in an appendix and did not include it within the amount formally requested. For example, it noted the three-year average (2022–23 to 2024–25) of actual variable costs was approximately $71.5 million which is $57.5 million more than what the Agency included in its variable budget.

Agency management indicated they generally roll forward the prior year's budget as a starting point for the next year and adjust as needed, including consideration of any Provincial Government budget direction (e.g., FTE staff reductions), rather than developing the budget based on robust resource plans.

Establishing budgets based on robust resource plans can help the Agency provide better information on the full costs expected in responding to wildfires and support more reasonable funding requests. It is also important because it helps ensure the Agency allocates necessary resources to manage and mitigate the risks associated with wildfires.

5. **We recommend the Saskatchewan Public Safety prepare its annual budget based on robust resource plans including all expected wildfire response costs for each upcoming wildfire season.**

4.4.2 Funding Model for the Agency

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency does not request funding for all costs reasonably expected in responding to wildfires The current funding model results in a significant amount of its funding being approved by the Legislative Assembly after the Agency has already incurred wildfire costs.

The Agency submits its budget request (including both wildfire costs and other costs under its emergency management responsibility such as disaster assistance for flooding events) annually to the Ministry of Community Safety. The Ministry funds the Agency and must include the Agency's budget request in its own budget request. The Ministry of Finance is the lead ministry responsible for Provincial Government budget development and integrity.[9]

The Provincial Government (Treasury Board) approves the Ministry of Community Safety's budget (appropriation) annually and incorporates the approved amount in the Provincial Budget Estimates (tabled in the Legislative Assembly in March each year for the next fiscal year starting April 1). Funding in the Estimates is typically approved by the Legislative Assembly prior to spending significant funds (i.e., by May). The full Legislative Assembly (Government and opposition parties) debate the Estimates (and Supplementary Estimates), and the Government requests approval of any additional funding exceeding the Estimates later in the fiscal year via special warrants or supplementary estimates ("after the fact" approval).[10]

See **Figure 8** for a detailed breakdown over the last five years of the Agency's annual operating budget and how the Agency was ultimately funded. As noted in **Section 4.4.1**, the Agency's budget does not include all expected costs and as such, the Legislative Assembly only approves a portion of the funding prior to each wildfire season (e.g., for the 2025–26 fiscal year, the Legislative Assembly approved 20% of the Agency's total operating expenditures prior to the 2025 wildfire season—in part because all expected costs are not fully represented in the Estimates and in part because the 2025 wildfire season was unprecedented in terms of number of hectares burned).[11]

Figure 8—Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency Operating Budgets and Funding from 2022–2023 to 2026–2027

	2022–23	2023–24	2024–25	2025–26	2026–27[A]
	(in Millions)				
Amount Approved in Provincial Budget (Estimates)	$79.7	$84.2	$74.4	$78.2	$76.3
Supplementary Estimates[C]	$31.6	$47.0	$53.7[B]	$313.2	N/A
Total Approved Operating Spending (Appropriation)	**$111.3**	**$131.2**	**$128.1**	**$391.4**	**N/A**
Percentage of Total Appropriation Approved at Time of Provincial Budget (Estimates)	72%	64%	58%	20%	N/A

Source: Provincial Auditor adapted from Provincial Budget Estimates and Supplementary Estimates.
[A] At March 31, 2026, the Provincial Budget (Estimates) have not yet been approved by the Legislative Assembly.
[B] Supplementary Estimates for 2024–25 also included $39.5 million for capital spending.
[C] Supplementary Estimates include additional funding when needed for disaster assistance.

Including the Agency's budget request within the Ministry of Community Safety's budget may limit prioritization of the Agency's initiatives, as trade-offs can occur against other Ministry priorities. We note, in contrast, certain other Treasury Board agencies (e.g., Innovation Saskatchewan, Water Security Agency) have separate votes in the

[9] Government of Saskatchewan, *26–27 Estimates*, p. 55.
[10] Special warrants receive Cabinet approval and can only be used when the Legislative Assembly is not in session. These special warrants are a part of supplementary estimates tabled in the Legislative Assembly—typically in November and March each year.
[11] The Government approved $97.9 million via special warrants dated August 21, 2025, and February 13, 2026 (Orders in Council 348/2025 and 37/2026). It tabled supplementary estimates totalling $313.2 million for the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency in the Legislative Assembly (including the special warrants amounts) on November 27, 2025, and March 18, 2026. www.legassembly.sk.ca/media/5j2f4fxx/sessional-paper-chart-2-30.pdf (8 May 2026).

Provincial Estimates, which helps ensure funds are allocated for specific purposes, prevents co-mingling of funds for different purposes, and can strengthen spending control. This separation may also help ensure funds are used appropriately and efficiently, supporting transparent decision-making and accountability.

Not having a reasonably complete budget in the Provincial Estimates results in a lack of transparency regarding expected costs for responding to wildfires. It also limits debate on spending prior to those expenditures being incurred.

In addition, this funding approach can lead to the Agency making less cost-effective wildfire response decisions. For example, without sufficient pre-season funding to hire additional resources, the Agency may not use an optimal mix of its own staff and contracted resources (firefighters, short-term helicopter contracts) in its wildfire response. Contracted resources (e.g., additional Type 1 firefighters) typically cost more and can take longer to receive than resources the Agency budgeted and secured before each wildfire season.

6. **We recommend the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency work with the Ministry of Finance to revisit the funding model for wildfire operations.**

4.5 Firefighter Training Not Consistently Tracked and Monitored

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency established reasonable qualifications and training programs for its firefighters, but it does not consistently track and monitor the training it provides to Type 1 and Type 2 firefighters. In some cases, we found firefighters did not complete all training required.

When responding to wildfires, the Agency mainly uses two types of firefighting crews:

- **Type 1:** firefighters employed by the Agency located in each response area. They provide initial and sustained attack on active fires typically working in crews of four.

- **Type 2:** contracted through formal agreements with First Nations organizations and northern communities. They provide firefighting and response services, as needed, and work primarily on fires within or near their home communities on sustained attack activities. They may also assist Type 1 crews on the initial response to new wildfires. Type 2 firefighters typically work in crews of five.

During 2025, the Agency employed approximately 205 Type 1 and contracted 410 Type 2 firefighters.[12]

The Agency is responsible for training both Type 1 and Type 2 firefighters. We found its qualifications and training required for firefighters aligned with good practice. For example, all firefighters must pass a fitness test prior to hiring. New firefighters must also have specific new-hire training (e.g., courses on fire behaviour, fire suppression, fire line safety, power pumps, handheld communications, helicopter use), incident command system training, and aviation safety training.

[12] The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency can also use Type 3 firefighters who are hired on an emergency basis. They are used to support Type 1 and Type 2 crews working on sustained action wildfires and are normally used on a fire line that is under control, in the mop-up stage, or low in complexity and expected fire behaviour.

If a firefighter returns for the next fire season, the Agency requires each firefighter to pass a fitness test as well as complete additional annual recurrent training covering areas such as general safety orientation, hover enplane and deplane (i.e., the safe movement of personnel and equipment from a hovering helicopter to the ground), radio communications equipment, and chainsaw safety.

We found while the Agency does not centrally track or monitor completion of required training, it also does not sufficiently track its firefighters—the Agency could not provide a complete list of Type 1 or Type 2 firefighters who fought fires in 2025. We also found the Agency tracks training (e.g., new hire training, incident command system training) in an IT system while the protection area staff manually track annual recurrent training, including fitness training.

We tested 10 Type 1 and 10 Type 2 firefighters who responded to fires in 2025 and found:

- 19 firefighters were appropriately trained upon hire. One Type 2 firefighter was no longer a firefighter and did not complete training.
- Four Type 1 and three Type 2 firefighters did not take the required hover enplane and deplane recurrent training.

Based on our testing, we found the Agency provided training to firefighters between April 7, 2025, and May 8, 2025. The first wildfire started March 31, 2025. Without tracking completed training, the Agency is unable to determine whether it had enough trained firefighters to respond to fires at the beginning of the wildfire season.

Not centrally tracking and monitoring Type 1 and Type 2 firefighter training increases the risk the Agency deploys firefighters to fight fires without sufficient training, putting those firefighters and others at risk of serious harm.

7. We recommend the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency centrally track and monitor training completion for Type 1 and Type 2 firefighters it uses to respond to wildfires.

4.6 Qualified Personnel Operate and Maintain Aircraft Fleet

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency uses qualified aircraft personnel to operate and maintain its aircraft fleet.

In 2025, the Agency had 35 pilots and eight air attack officers operating, and 31 aircraft maintenance engineers maintaining, its aircraft fleet. It requires the following qualifications and training for its aircraft personnel:

- **Pilots**: Must be licenced by Transport Canada as well as trained on the specific aircraft (e.g., airtanker) they fly. Other training requirements include areas such as incident command system, fatigue risk management, bombing procedures (e.g., water, fire retardant), safety orientation, and safety management system.

- **Air attack officers**: Must have Level III air attack officer training, advanced fire behaviour training, and complete the wildfire management and aviation course. The Agency also requires the officers to have recurrent training each year such as bombing procedures (e.g., water, fire retardant), aircraft marshalling, safety management system, and aircraft fueling.[13]

- **Aircraft maintenance engineers**: Must have an aircraft maintenance engineer licence. Training requirements include areas such as the federal *Canadian Aviation Regulations* for maintenance, training on both the maintenance control and maintenance policy manuals, safety orientation, and safety management system.

We found the aircraft personnel training and qualification requirements aligned with good practice.

Our testing of three pilots, four aircraft maintenance engineers, and two air attack officers found each were qualified and received required mandatory and ongoing training associated with each role.

Hiring qualified personnel to operate and maintain its aircraft fleet allows the Agency to use appropriately skilled and competent staff to fight wildfires. Qualified staff reduce the risk of injuries or death occurring while combating wildfires and aid in better protecting Saskatchewan residents from wildfires.

4.7 Resource Utilization Analysis Needed

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency tracks resource utilization during wildfires but conducts limited analysis.

The Agency maintains an IT system to track information related to resource utilization. We observed the system and found it tracks various types of resources (e.g., aircraft, firefighters, bulldozers) in real-time including specific locations and availability.

We found the Agency performs limited analysis to help evaluate how effectively the Agency uses its current resources (e.g., resource downtime, wildfire containment rates) and how to optimize requests for additional resources (e.g., conditions/thresholds to trigger external resource requests).

Over the past three years, the Agency contracted resources from external jurisdictions to meet demand (see **Figure 6**). In 2025, the Agency made 46 requests for over 900 personnel. It also received 12 aircraft and air crews to help combat wildfires during 2025. We found the Agency does not track requests not fulfilled by resource sharing partners.

In addition, we found the Agency did not assess whether it received those external resources in a timely manner. Our analysis of 2025 external requests found:

- It took on average 15 days for external personnel (e.g., firefighters) to arrive and deploy to fires (ranged between 2–66 days).

[13] Air attack officers are aerial wildfire suppression specialists who direct (e.g., where and when to waterbomb a fire) firefighting aircraft from a guide plane (i.e., Bird Dog).

- The Agency did not always receive external resources (e.g., firefighters) by the requested date—76% of the time the resources did not arrive by the time requested. It took an average of three days (ranged between 2 days early and 10 days late) from the requested for date to mobilize the resources.

- The Agency received two aircraft 6 days after the requested for date.

Also, the Agency did not conduct cost benefit analysis around the increased costs associated with external resources received through agreements with resource sharing partners. We examined the costs related to two external requests (firefighters from Mexico and Australia) during the 2025 wildfire season. We found those two requests cost about twice and over five times more, respectively, than using the Agency's own firefighters.

Without analyzing resource utilization for aircraft, personnel, and equipment, the Agency is limited in its ability to identify areas for improvement and effectively update its resource plans.

8. **We recommend the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency analyze the effectiveness of its wildfire resource utilization (e.g., aircraft, personnel, equipment) to make informed resource planning decisions.**

4.8 Equipment Contracts for Additional Resources Established but Cost and Availability Not Assessed

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency established short- and long-term contracts with vendors to obtain additional equipment (e.g., heavy equipment, helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft) when needed during wildfire seasons. It does not analyze costs or whether these contracted resources were available timely.

Heavy Equipment

In January/February of each year, the Agency communicates with interested vendors capable of supplying heavy equipment (e.g., excavators, bulldozers, tractors) and operators for each upcoming fire season. The Agency sets out the hourly rates it will pay for each type of equipment. The Agency's has short-term call-as-needed contract agreements (i.e., pay only for the contract when equipment used) with eligible vendors.

In 2025, the Agency had 159 call-as-needed contracts for over 1,000 pieces of heavy equipment across its 12 protection areas. The Agency uses heavy equipment to build firelines or firebreaks (areas cleared of vegetation and debris) to stop or slow the spread of wildfires.

With these arrangements, the Agency cannot be assured the equipment will be available when requested because vendors may already be using it elsewhere. Management indicated staff may call multiple vendors until one has the required equipment available. We found the Agency does not track or analyze when resources are either requested or received. It also has not assessed if long-term contracts for heavy equipment are feasible. During the 2025 fall review meeting where Agency staff and management met to discuss the 2025 fire season, we found staff noted delays in receiving heavy equipment impacted fire suppression.

Helicopters

The Agency relies on a mix of both short- and long-term contracts for helicopters during wildfire seasons. Helicopters can drop water from buckets to help suppress a fire's spread, or they can be used to transport firefighters and equipment to specific locations.

Typical long-term helicopter contracts are for 100 days (over four months between May and August) and give the Agency full use of a helicopter during that time. In 2025, the Agency had eight long-term helicopter contracts.

Short-term contracts are much shorter (e.g., 1- or 2-day contracts) and are agreed to using the call-as-needed format. In 2025, the Agency had 82 short-term contracts. Each contract sets out the fixed hourly rate and daily minimum cost (excluding fuel and oil), as well as any speciality service/equipment costs (e.g., buckets).

As shown in **Figure 9**, the Agency used more flight hours from short-term helicopter contracts during wildfire seasons in 2024 and 2025. It fully utilized its long-term contracts in these years, which made it rely more on short-term contracts. In 2025, the Agency used its short-term contracts for 85% of total helicopter hours.

Figure 9—Usage of Helicopter Contracts in 2024 and 2025 Wildfire Seasons

Contract Type and Hours Used	2024		2025	
	Contracts	Hours Used	Contracts	Hours Used
Long-Term Helicopter Contracts	7	2,337 (21%)	8	3,585 (15%)
Short-Term Helicopter Contracts	21	8,938 (79%)	36	20,386 (85%)
Total Hours		11,275		23,971

Source: Adapted from information provided by the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency.

We found the Agency tracks the number of hours used per contract and the costs associated for its long-term contracts. It does not analyze the specific costs associated with its short-term helicopter contracts.

In 2025, the hourly rates for the eight long-term helicopter contracts averaged about $2,500, costing the Agency approximately $9 million in total. Our analysis of the short-term contracts found hourly rates for the same types of helicopters averaged about $3,400. As a result, the Agency is paying about 35% more for short-term contracts indicating it could have potentially saved approximately $500,000 by using an additional long-term contract in 2025. We found the Agency has not assessed the cost difference when using more short-term contracts compared to long-term or determined the optimal number of long-term contracts and location of helicopters required to meet its needs.

We also found the Agency does not track or analyze when resources are requested and received. During the 2024 fall review meeting, we found staff identified a need for more long-term contracts because reliance on numerous short-term (e.g.,1-day) contracts often resulted in equipment being unavailable when needed.

Fixed-Wing Aircraft

The Agency uses both short- and long-term contracts for fixed-wing aircraft mainly to detect wildfires and transport firefighters and equipment to specific locations.

We found the Agency tracks the number of hours used per fixed-wing aircraft contract and the costs associated for its long-term contracts. In 2025, the Agency used all five of its long-term contracts at a total cost of approximately $1.2 million. The use of these aircraft ranged from 1.4 to 2.3 average hours per day.

The Agency does not track or analyze the costs associated with its short-term contracts. In 2025, it used 5 of its 11 short-term contracts for a total of 547.9 hours.

Like heavy equipment and helicopter contracts, the Agency does not track or analyze when fixed-wing aircraft resources are requested and received.

Due to the importance of this equipment (i.e., heavy equipment, helicopters, and fixed-wing aircraft) in fighting wildfires, formally analyzing this information would allow the Agency to improve decisions in selecting vendors to ensure it has necessary equipment available when needed.

Analyzing costs and timeliness of services would also allow the Agency to determine if it is more efficient to have more long-term contracts for key pieces of equipment like helicopters. Not having sufficient resources at the right time increases the risk of fires escaping containment resulting in more severe fires and increased wildfire response costs.

9. We recommend the Saskatchewan Public Safety formally analyze the use of short- and long-term contracts (e.g., when equipment requested and received, costs) for equipment used in combatting wildfires.

4.9 Aviation Assets Not Consistently Available Due to Maintenance

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency does not always have its full fleet of aircraft available to combat wildfires due to delays in maintenance.

The Agency has a fleet of 10 airtankers and seven guide aircraft (Bird Dog)—see **Figure 10** for the number and description of each type of aircraft in the Agency's aircraft fleet. It has five air tanker bases located in La Ronge, Buffalo Narrows, Meadow Lake, Prince Albert, and Hudson Bay where its aircraft can land, refuel, and load retardant. Although La Ronge is the fleet's home base, aircraft and crews are positioned at the other bases as needed throughout a fire season.

Figure 10—Number and Description of Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency's Aircraft Fleet at March 31, 2026

Aircraft	Number in Fleet	Year Built	Description
Convair 580A	3	1954 to 1958	Land-based air tanker with the capacity to hold up to 1,750 imperial gallons (8,000 litres) of retardant or approved gel
Q400AT	1	2009	Land-based air tanker with the capacity to hold up to 2,640 imperial gallons (12,000 litres) of retardant or approved gel

Aircraft	Number in Fleet	Year Built	Description
CL-215T	6	1987	Turbine powered water-scooping air tanker with the capacity to hold up to 1,200 imperial gallons (5,400 litres) of water and the ability to reload numerous times within a four-hour mission
Bird Dog	7	1976 to 1983	Guide the tankers and manage air traffic over and near wildfire

Source: www.saskpublicsafety.ca/emergencies-and-response/spsa-response-capacity (4 May 2026).

The Agency monitors and tracks maintenance of aircraft as it is highly regulated (i.e., based on pre-established guidelines from the manufacturer and Transport Canada). For example, the Agency is required to complete aircraft maintenance after a certain number of drops, flight hours, or landings. It is also required to submit proposed maintenance schedules to Transport Canada for approval for each airplane it operates.

We tested the maintenance logs for four aircraft and found the Agency carried out maintenance as expected. We also found aircraft maintenance engineers appropriately approved the maintenance performed.

In November 2024, during scheduled maintenance, the Agency identified significant deficiencies (e.g., cracks) on two water-scooping air tankers (CL-215Ts) resulting in these aircraft being grounded for the 2025 fire season. These two aircraft remain unavailable for part of the 2026 fire season as they are still under repair; however, the Agency expects both to be available by July 2026.

In addition, the Agency will not have a third aircraft (Convair 580A) available at the start of the 2026 fire season due to delays in maintenance. Management indicated the delays are mainly due to lack of experienced staff (i.e., licenced aircraft maintenance engineers). In 2026, the Agency had five (2025: six) unfilled aircraft maintenance engineer positions. See **Recommendation 2** regarding the need for a targeted recruitment and retention plan.

When aircraft are unavailable, we found the Agency uses its agreements with external resource sharing partners to obtain aircraft to continue to fight wildfires. For example, in 2025, the Agency received 12 aircraft (primarily air tankers) and air crews through its agreements with its partners. Management indicated the Agency plans to use its resource sharing agreements to obtain additional aircraft in 2026 as needed.

In 2024–25, the Agency committed to purchasing four new replacement planes for its land-based air tanker fleet at a cost of approximately $187 million.[14] It received one airtanker during the summer of 2025, and it expected another to arrive in August 2026.

The Agency established an informal key performance indicator to have its aircraft available for use throughout the wildfire season 97% of the time. We found the Agency has not formally documented or analyzed this indicator. As noted, the Agency had two aircraft unavailable in 2025 and three aircraft unavailable in 2026.

Having aircraft available can assist in containing wildfires. Analyzing the extent of ongoing aircraft maintenance can inform changes needed to an asset management plan (e.g., reduced life expectancy). The Agency needs to develop an asset management plan related to wildfire response assets including its owned aircraft (see **Recommendation 4** about developing an asset management plan).

[14] Order in Council 44/2025.

4.10 Recommendations from Formal Post-Season Reviews Not Tracked and Monitored

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency holds bi-annual meetings with staff and management to review past fire seasons to identify issues and areas for improvement. It also conducts periodic formal wildfire season reviews but does not formally track and monitor implementation of recommendations from those reviews.

In the fall of each year, the Agency holds meetings between staff and management from its different wildfire management operational areas (e.g., air operations, logistics, land operations) to conduct a review of the past fire season and identify improvements. Each spring, prior to the start of the fire season, it once again holds meetings to discuss the same matters and what the Agency changed from the prior year.

We reviewed the minutes of the 2024 and 2025 meetings and found individuals discussed strengths and successes, weakness and challenges encountered, and potential areas for improvement. For example, in relation to wildfire preparedness, individuals identified issues such as delays/lack of available heavy equipment, shortage of pilots and aircraft mechanics, and poor helicopter utilization.

In late 2025, the Agency created the First Nations Wildfire Strategy Working Group to discuss wildfire strategy, recommended changes, and proposed operational improvements from the perspective of First Nations wildfire partners. The Working Group meets as needed and consists of the Agency, Prince Albert Grand Council, Meadow Lake Tribal Council, and Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation, along with Indigenous Services Canada as an observer. The Group met three times between January and March 2026. We found it discussed resource allocations (e.g., reducing reliance on external resources), firefighter retention, and prioritizing Indigenous values at risk.

Beginning in December 2024, the Agency conducted a formal review of the 2024 wildfire season. The review evaluated the Agency's wildfire program including prevention, mitigation, preparedness, and response activities. We found the review aligned with good practice (e.g., including what went well, improvements, recommendations). The Agency made 25 recommendations and identified 18 opportunities for improvement. For example, the 2024 review recommended the Agency:

- Work with the Government to explore the possibility of increasing the budget allocation to match rising actual costs and allowing the Agency to maintain reserves to manage the more frequent cost spikes
- Explore the use of drones where they are safe, cost effective, and suitable for the emergency response situations given high aviation costs and ongoing challenges with aircraft availability
- Ensure all staff positions at protection bases are fully staffed prior to the start of each wildfire season

We found the Agency completed the review within four months (by April 2025), but it did not finalize the report until December 2025 which did not allow it to incorporate changes for the 2025 wildfire season. At the time of our audit in March 2026, the Agency was not tracking and monitoring the status of the recommendations or opportunities for improvement.

In November 2025, the Agency contracted a third party to conduct a formal review of the 2025 wildfire season. At April 30, 2026, the results of that review have not been released.

Management indicated it plans to track and monitor all recommendations from the formal reviews once the 2025 review is complete. Once it does so, it should report this information to the Agency's Board of Directors.

Not tracking and monitoring recommendations made from formal reviews or sufficiently adjusting resource plans each year based on experience and results increase the risk the Agency will not have adequate resources to effectively combat fires each year. Further, not providing key information to the Agency's Board of Directors, such as the results and implementation status of recommendations from wildfire reviews, limits the Board's ability to make informed decisions.

10. We recommend the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency monitor implementation of recommendations from formal wildfire season reviews, and report to its Board on implementation status.

4.11 Reporting to Senior Management Occurring but Lacking Analysis

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency communicates with senior management and partners (e.g., First Nations); however, it does not sufficiently analyze wildfire statistics and response success to help inform resource planning decisions.

In addition to the fire season review meetings and formal reviews noted in **Section 4.10**, the Agency also completes detailed wildfire statistics reports each year reporting to senior management on statistics such as:

- Number of wildfires
- Wildfire causes (e.g., human, lightning)
- Total area burned
- Hours flown by aircraft
- Imported (i.e., contracted) resources
- Total fire expenditures

We also found the reports provide statistical information over the last 10 years to identify trends. However, the reports lack analysis including analysis of the number and costs associated with large fires that escaped containment (i.e., wildfires greater than 100 hectares) and the number of fires initially attacked successfully.

Escaped fires burn more area and cost more money. The Agency's objective is to maximize the number of fires successfully attacked and contained and minimize the number of escaped fires.

As shown in **Figure 11**, when the Agency can lessen the number of escaped fires, it reduces the costs for suppression and the overall total wildfire costs end up less. For example, in 2022, 17% of fires escaped containment (i.e., ended up growing greater than 100 hectares in size) and cost $15.2 million to suppress. By comparison, in 2025, 21% of fires escaped containment and cost $208.8 million.

Figure 11—Escaped Wildfires (Greater than 100 Hectares) Compared to Response Costs

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Total Number of Wildfires	635	443	471	595	510
Number of Escaped Wildfires	197	76	92	101	107
Percentage of Escaped Wildfires	**31%**	**17%**	**20%**	**17%**	**21%**
Total Wildfire Costs (in millions)	$110.0	$51.0	$98.6	$95.2	$351.6
Wildfire Costs for Escape Wildfires (in millions)	$55.7	$15.2	$54.4	$56.3	$208.8
Percentage of Escaped Wildfire Costs out of Total Costs	**51%**	**30%**	**55%**	**59%**	**59%**

Source: Adapted from the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency wildfire statistic reports.

Fire management agencies often use the proportion of fires classified as having initial attack success as a common indicator of suppression effectiveness.[15] Agency management indicated the Agency's goal is to keep fires below 10 hectares, as fires of this size have lower costs to combat and lower risk of impact. We found the Agency does not track or monitor this goal. Our analysis as outlined in **Figure 12** indicated that in 2022 the Agency had an initial attack success rate of 77% compared to 70% in 2025.

Figure 12—Wildfires Less than 10 Hectares in Size

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Total Number of Wildfires	635	443	471	595	510
Number of Wildfires Less Than 10 Hectares	372	342	343	452	355
Percentage of Fires with Initial Attack Success	**59%**	**77%**	**73%**	**76%**	**70%**

Source: Adapted from the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency wildfire statistic reports.

Successful initial attack depends on deploying the right number and right kind of firefighting resources quickly. Measuring the success of initial attacks after the wildfire season can help determine whether changes to resources are needed to support more effective fire suppression in the future.

11. We recommend the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency set and monitor an initial-attack success measure for wildfire response.

[15] connectsci.au/wf/article/33/12/WF24104/84691/A-comparative-analysis-of-wildfire-initial-attack (10 May 2026).

In addition, we found senior management also provides verbal updates to the Agency's Board of Directors on wildfires. We reviewed the Board's minutes between March 2025 and January 2026 and found senior management provided certain wildfire information. For example, management reported:

- At May 1, 2025, firefighting crews, equipment, and air assets were ready for the season.

- At January 29, 2026, the 2026 response season operational preparedness was on track (e.g., pilot training). Management noted one air tanker needed significant repairs and would be delayed for the 2026 season. The Agency planned to leverage resource sharing agreements to fill the need as required.

As noted in **Section 4.10**, we found the Agency does not track and monitor all recommendations from the formal wildfire season reviews. It should report this information to the Agency's Board of Directors.

5.0 SELECTED REFERENCES

Auditor General of Alberta. (2018). *Alberta Agriculture and Forestry—Wildfire Management: Processes for Prevention and Review and Improvement*. Edmonton: Author.

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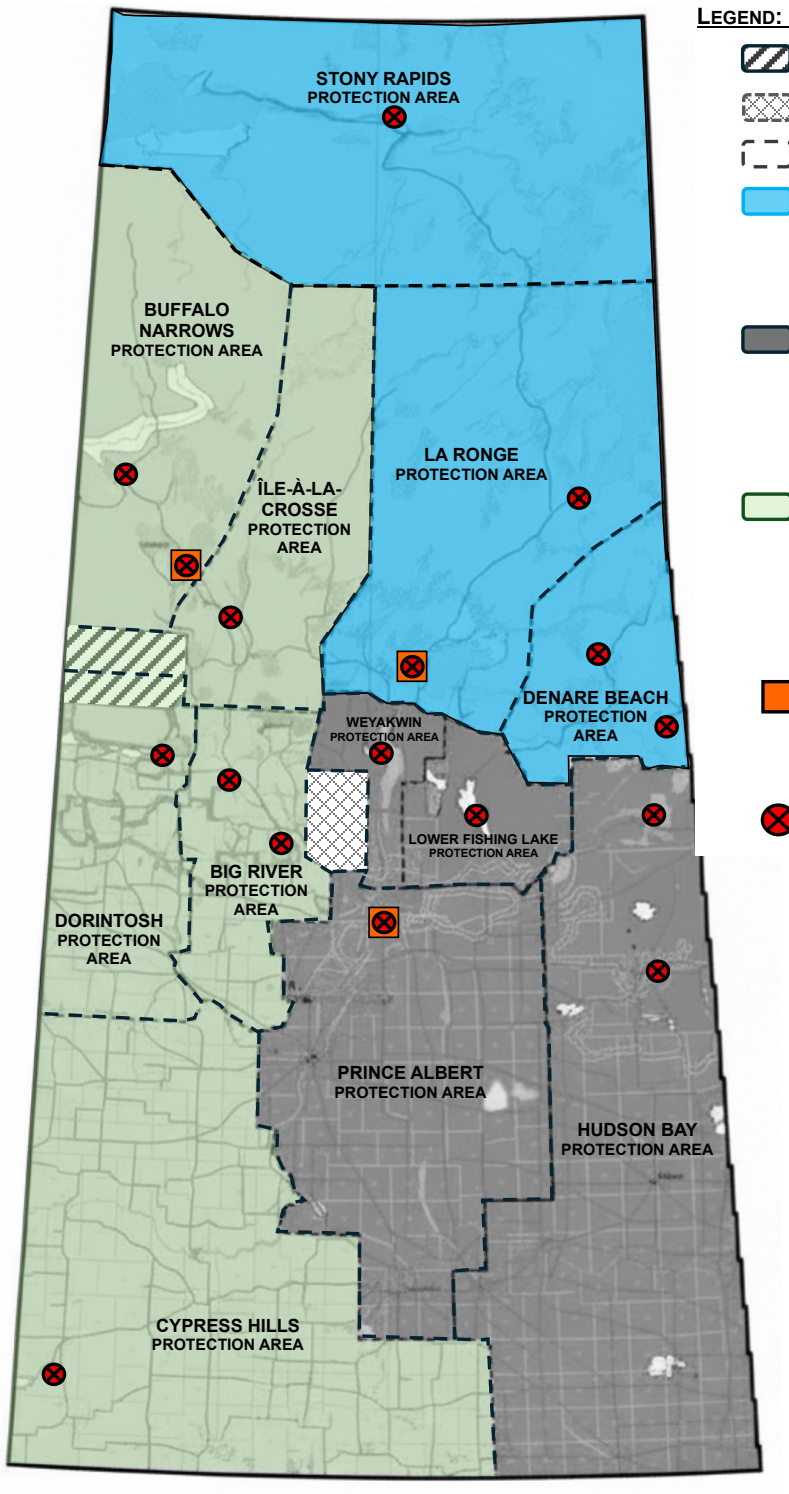
6.0 Response Centres and Protection Areas



LEGEND:

- **Primrose Air Weapons Range**
- **National Park**
- **Protection Areas**
- **Northern Response Area**
  - **Protection Areas:**
    - Denare Beach
    - La Ronge
    - Stony Rapids
- **Eastern Response Area**
  - **Protection Areas:**
    - Hudson Bay
    - Lower Fishing Lake
    - Prince Albert
    - Weyakwin
- **Western Response Area**
  - **Protection Areas:**
    - Big River
    - Buffalo Narrows
    - Dorintosh
    - Île-à-la-Crosse
    - Cypress Hills
- **Response Centre**
  - Buffalo Narrows
  - La Ronge
  - Prince Albert
- **Protection Base**

Source: Adapted from publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/79231 (1 May 2026).