

Alberta Agriculture and Forestry Wildfire Management: Processes for Prevention and Review and Improvement



Executive Summary

November 2018

Who

Alberta Agriculture and Forestry

What

Performance Audit

When

We conducted our field work from February to June 2018 and substantially completed our audit on October 2, 2018.

Learn more

www.agric.gov.ab.ca

Why we did this audit

Every year, an average of 1,400 wildfires occur in Alberta's forests. The financial impact can be considerable. Aside from the money the province spends on wildfire management (\$294 million in fiscal 2017–2018), wildfires can cause hundreds of millions of dollars of damage, displacing people from their homes and disrupting businesses.

The Department of Agriculture and Forestry has an established wildfire management program to protect the 39 million hectares of forest in Alberta, consisting of the following five components: prevention; detection; pre-suppression preparedness; suppression; review and improvement.

Our audit objective was to:

- Determine if the **prevention** and **review and improvement** components of the department's wildfire management program are well designed and working effectively.
- Determine if the department has processes to evaluate, implement and report on recommendations and opportunities for improvement from these public reviews:
 - 2011 Flat Top Complex Wildfire Review (Flat Top Complex Wildfire Review Committee): 21 recommendations
 - Wildfire Management Program and the 2015 Fire Season Review: four recommendations; 18 opportunities for improvement
 - 2016 Horse River Wildfire Review: 10 recommendations; 11 opportunities for improvement

What we concluded

As of June 2018, the department had effective systems and processes for the planning and delivery of its wildfire prevention and review and improvement activities. However, the department needs to improve its systems and processes in the following areas:

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- measure, monitor and report on the results and effectiveness of the activities set out in its forest areas' wildfire prevention plans
- publicly report on its FireSmart programs, including how this work helps reduce wildfire hazard and risk
- comply with its business rules for internal results reporting for the review and improvement program
- show implementation timelines or completion target dates in its implementation plans for recommendations and opportunities for improvement from external public reviews against which it can measure and report progress

Why this is important to Albertans

Albertans have experienced devastating losses over the last few years due to wildfires, and studies indicate that future wildfire seasons may become longer and more severe due to climate change.¹ Wildfires threaten human lives, communities, natural resources, wildlife habitat, industrial facilities and infrastructure.

The department's wildfire prevention program is designed to reduce human-caused wildfire occurrence and the potential for wildfire loss and damage through a combination of FireSmart, education, and enforcement.

Albertans should be confident that these programs are working effectively to reduce the risk of wildfire damage and have access to information about how they are meeting this goal.

What needs to be done

We recommend that the Department of Agriculture and Forestry:

- Ensure processes are in place to evaluate and report on wildfire prevention programs.
- Comply with business rules for internal reviews results reporting and establish and monitor implementation timelines for recommendations from external reviews.

¹ Alberta Wildfire Management Branch Strategic Plan 2017—2019. Page 5.

Consequences of not taking action

- Without proper reporting and results analysis, the department will not have adequate information to assess whether the activities and programs carried out by the 10 forest areas as part of their wildfire prevention plans are achieving desired results efficiently and effectively for the public funds spent or what necessary changes need to be made for improvement going forward.
- Without full public reporting on all aspects of the FireSmart program, Albertans are not being provided with all the information they need to fully understand what work the department is doing in this area towards wildfire hazard and risk reduction, why it focuses efforts where it does, and what work the department is doing to support community-based FireSmart practices. Full public reporting will also enable the department to better explain to Albertans the work it is doing in this area.
- Without establishing implementation timelines for the recommendations and opportunities set out in external reviews, department management does not have an effective process to alert them in a timely manner to problem areas which require their attention and intervention.
- Without public reporting on the progress of implementation activities against target timelines, Albertans will not know if the department is on track to make necessary changes to the wildfire management program and cannot hold the department accountable if it is not on track.

Read the full report at:

oag.ab.ca

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