

Focus on Safety



by Steve Mueller

Due Diligence and Readiness in Fire Season

Wildfires definitely aren't out of the ordinary for anyone with more than a little time spent in the silviculture industry, and all of us know that dealing with fire requires extraordinary care. My own experience ranges from close calls with woodland wildfires to what you could call a regular firefighting commute one hot, dry Alberta summer. It seemed that almost every day on the way home from work, we had to pull over and extinguish roadside grass fires started by sparks from the adjacent rail line or tossed cigarette butts.

One fact holds true for all fires. We need to give them serious respect because of their potentially deadly, destructive force. Exactly what that means is worth a good look now, as another summer heats up across Canada.

For silviculture contractors, the fundamental questions about fires centre on being prepared and meeting the "due diligence" obligations that apply where you operate. Generally, you must be ready to take initial suppression action on wildfires that start on or near your worksite. Regulatory requirements are based on the type of work being done and the hazard levels involved. It's up to you to anticipate and prepare on your own to deal with fire situations that can reasonably be expected to affect your work site and activities. Use your knowledge, training, and experience to assess what you might need and then put the necessary resources in place.

More specifically, due diligence means you should have:

- A fire response plan, especially if your client doesn't supply one. Either way, you need to decide how to implement it. For instance, where do you locate firefighting equipment, and will you rely on tanks or a natural source of water if fire breaks out? What's your plan for communication with your crew and anyone else on or near the work site?
- Workers with appropriate and current training. (BC requires workers fighting wildfires to have completed a basic fire suppression and safety course or a refresher. You may need to meet a comparable standard if you operate in another province.)
- Plans for complete and effective reporting of fires, including information like site coordinates, road access, firefighting resources already there, weather conditions, and whether there are homes and power lines in the area.
- Adequate firefighting gear for everyone on your crew. This goes beyond hand tools. You'll likely also need a water delivery system with pump, hoses, and designated water source.
- Up-to-date fire fighting insurance coverage.

Naturally, you never really want to put all that due diligence planning and preparation into action. You want to prevent forest fires.

Start by paying attention to weather. Look for a higher risk of fire after an extended hot spell without rain, say three or more days. Air movement also matters, as fire spreads faster in strong breezes or consistent winds than in calm conditions. South-facing slopes will be drier, posing a greater risk. Another critical factor is moisture in the air, and a relatively inexpensive sling psychrometer will measure low relative humidity that raises the fire risk. When the risk is high, you may need to keep a fire watch, go to fire hours, or shut down work altogether.

It's also good to remember that fires aren't always Mother Nature's fault. People cause more than 40% of the wildfires in BC, so be very careful working in the woods. For instance, avoid letting grass or swamp muck accumulate around the mufflers of your quads. When these materials dry, they can ignite from the heat and drop to the ground as you drive. Keep a fire extinguisher mounted on every quad for that eventuality.

Supervisors should designate acceptable smoking areas on the cut block. Historically, many fires started by silviculture crews were due to careless smokers.

All of this boils down to three words: planning, preparation, and prevention. Applying all three will satisfy your due diligence obligations - and help to reduce the number of destructive wildfires as well as the potential risk to your workers.

Resources

These BC wildfire resources may be useful for all members of the silviculture industry:

- *Forest Fire Preparedness* at www.bcforestsafe.org/node/1320
- *Guidelines for Fire Suppression Systems and Fire Fighting Hand Tools*, at www.bcforestsafe.org/files/files/Forms%20and%20Templates/Guidelines-fire-suppression-systems-hand-tools-July-16.pdf
- *Training Forestry Workers to Safely Fight Small Forest Fires*, at www.wsca.ca/index.php?Page=231.0&Key=374

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