

Forestry Strategy: Fireproofing Communities through Public Forest Access Roads

Submitted by the Timmins Chamber of Commerce

Co-sponsored by the Greater Sudbury Chamber of Commerce

Adopted by the Ontario Chamber of Commerce – May 2019

ISSUE:

Forest fires can occur anywhere in Ontario, but most large fires occur in the boreal forest. They can threaten human safety, destroy property or disrupt economic activities.¹ However, wildfires are also an important natural process in Ontario's forest ecosystems. Managing forest fires in Ontario is about balancing the benefits of forest fires, and protecting public safety and communities. Introducing a Forestry Strategy Program will help protect communities against the threat of wildfires while increased funding for forest access roads will support the infrastructure needed in rural and northern Ontario to provide access for firefighting efforts as we face intensifying fire seasons.

BACKGROUND:

Prolonged dry conditions throughout Ontario made 2018 one of the most active forest fire seasons in almost a decade, with more than 1,300 forest fires burning over 265,000 hectares of forest, nearly double the 10-year average.²

The impact wildfires have on communities can be devastating. Solutions and mitigative approaches to reduce the hazard posed by interface fire to communities exist by implementing vegetation management strategies.³ The Provincial Government can look to create greater partnerships with the forestry industry and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry to assist in forest management and combat the economic impacts wildfires have on communities.

The forest industry can work with governments, First Nations and local communities, to apply strategies that will minimize climate change risks to our forests and forest communities in the years to come. Ontario's Forest Access Roads Funding Program (a cost-sharing program with industry that supports the construction and maintenance of access roads in Crown forests) will provide a critical infrastructure to ensure that communities and forests are accessible for firefighting efforts.

A good example of this was the major Timmins area forest fire of 2012, which forced the closure of Highway 144 for days. Fortunately, the 100 km Papakomeka/Grassy River forest access road network was able to provide a critical link from Timmins to Sudbury and served as a crucial route for emergency and fire response during the disaster.⁴ This road is maintained with support from Ontario's forest access roads funding program.

¹ [https://www.oafc.on.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/page/2507/FMS_Discussion_Paper%20\(2\)-1.pdf](https://www.oafc.on.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/page/2507/FMS_Discussion_Paper%20(2)-1.pdf)

² https://prod-environmental-registry.s3.amazonaws.com/2018-11/EnvironmentPlan_1.pdf

³ <https://www.firesmartcanada.ca/images/uploads/resources/FireSmart-Protecting-Your-Community.pdf>

⁴ Email correspondence with Chamber member EACOM Timber Corporation on Tuesday, December 18, 2018.

Forest access roads also play a critical role in the movement of goods and people, supporting natural resource industries as well as the people who live, work and play in rural and northern Ontario.⁵ Roads on Crown land provide access for industries such as forestry, mining, prospecting, trapping and tourism, while facilitating the maintenance of critical infrastructure such as power grids, telephone lines, railways and pipelines.

In addition, many of Ontario's First Nations communities rely exclusively upon public forest access roads to transport goods and to reach vital outside services such as healthcare and education. This public infrastructure is, and will continue to be, relied upon by all Ontarians, especially during emergencies like forest fires.

Fireproofing communities can significantly reduce the risk that wildfires pose and mitigate the socioeconomic impacts from damages caused by wildfires.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Protect against wildland fire incidents through the ongoing development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans.
2. Reinstatement of the Public Forest Access Roads program funding to the original 2006 level of \$75 million.

⁵ <https://www.ontario.ca/page/state-ontarios-natural-resources-forests-2016>