

# International support in disasters

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The summer of 2021 brought persistent drought and heatwaves across Canada, resulting in significant fire activity. National preparedness reached its highest level and domestic resources were stretched to capacity when dealing with aggressive wildfires that reached new levels of radical fire behaviour.



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In July 2021, the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre (CIFFC) made a formal request for assistance to the AFAC National Resource Sharing Centre (NRSC), facilitated by agreements established 7 years earlier. These exchanges have been instrumental over the years, with NRSC previously facilitating the deployment of Australian resources to Canada; 234 in 2017 and 27 in 2018. The 2021 Australian contingent consisted of 55 resources deployed to British Columbia and Ontario as well as CIFFC headquarters in Manitoba.

The request provided an opportunity for Australia to reciprocate after 242 Canadian resources travelled to New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria to assist with the devastating 2019–20 bushfires.

The protocols and processes involved to integrate fire management specialists and crews into their respective host agencies demonstrates insight on how the linkages between the Australasian Inter-Service Incident Management System (AIIMS) and the Canadian ICS (incident command system) foster a common operating picture and nomenclature for deployed staff to increase interoperability. These exchanges provide an opportunity for CIFFC and the NRSC to test, adapt and improve national standards and doctrine fundamental to resource exchange and contemporary response techniques.

The focus of these deployments is aimed at response to complement efforts on the fire ground. An unintended consequence of this is the learnings that each individual involved, both Canadian and Australian, bring back to their own organisation.

As members involved with the deployment, both on the receiving and outgoing ends, we realized that the value of these exchanges goes far beyond the obvious need to have more boots on the ground or to provide needed support and relief. Each agency was able to tap into the other's expertise, compare methodologies and

foster ongoing candid relationships that still reap dividends within a global learning culture that is continuing to develop. The inherent strengthening of the partnerships between each country is experienced by the national resource-sharing agencies, each wildfire and bushfire agency and individuals involved.

Deployments like the Australian/Canadian partnership allows for different perspectives and diversity of thought to strengthen practices, efficiencies and safety.

## Understanding the human conditions

After being briefed and having arrived in British Columbia (BC), it was apparent that the province was experiencing a unique situation on many levels. In late June, BC experienced a 'heat dome'; extreme, prolonged high temperatures that contributed to over 800 deaths. On 29 June, the Village of Lytton recorded a temperature of 49.5, higher than the Las Vegas record. On 30 June 30 within less than 30 minutes, a fire razed the Village of Lytton, displacing hundreds, including surrounding First Nation communities. Sadly, 2 civilians lost their lives in the fire, this was a first for the BC Wildfire Service and impacted them deeply.

In May 2021, the mass grave of 215 children was discovered in the grounds of the Tk'emlups te Secwepmc Residential School in Kamloops, BC.<sup>1</sup> The entire country was shaken by this discovery, and this served to rapidly increase distrust of the government. On top of this, Indigenous peoples were simultaneously being impacted by sustained fire activity. On arrival at the Kamloops fire centre, Australian personnel were greeted with a blanket of thick smoke, coupled with numerous signs and displays of hundreds of pairs of shoes in honour of the lost children.

The BC Wildfire Service was faced with the mammoth task of protecting communities, managing over 1,600 wildfires and regaining the trust of First Nations communities. A total of 428 Indigenous and local communities were put on evacuation orders, resulting in psychological stress and economic hardship. Over 850,000 hectares were burnt. At the peak, nearly 4,000 personnel were involved in wildfire response efforts, including more than 900 out-of-province personnel and 625 members of the Canadian Armed Forces.

This complex scenario showed just how important it is to understand the human conditions where you are—the cultural and political environment, social expectations, the key partnerships and relationships. Australian personnel were briefed on these factors to understand the human side—what the local crews were going through—were important to making a valuable contribution and having great learning opportunities at the same time.

## Collaboration with First Nations communities

The BC Wildfire Service embedded First Nations liaisons into emergency centres and collaborated closely with them. The liaisons provided local knowledge, reviewed operational tactics and led the communication with their respective communities. First Nations people were involved in the training of initial attack crews and firefighters assisting with preparedness and community protection. These approaches were so successful that they are being incorporated into regular business.

## Roaming support

Management representatives, trainees and incident management team coaches were deployed to assist with response efforts and to ensure external engagement was sustainable. These 'roaming' resources were available to coach and mentor junior staff who were relatively new, allowing for in-action learning.

There was also a group of physiotherapists, massage therapists and chiropractors traveling around the fire camps to offer physical recovery and relaxation support to staff. Not only did this program reduce stress, it also reduced factors leading to fatigue, leading to fewer preventable injuries.

Both of these approaches have been adopted as normal practice given their success during the 2021 wildfire season.

## Community preparedness

British Columbia has heavily invested in FireSmart, a national and provincial program that educates communities about the risk of wildfire. Participation is encouraged at all levels, from individuals to whole communities and local governments, and funding is made available for mitigation actions, such as clearing branches or prescribed burning. The program encourages communities to seek out fire-resistant materials, clear properties of combustible materials and make a fire plan. It gives everyone a defined role in creating a province that is resilient to wildfires.

In summer 2021 Logan Lake, a FireStart community, was challenged by a fast-moving wildfire. Through a combination of years of fuel treatments, FireSmart neighbourhoods and a well-established community structural protection plan, Logan Lake was saved. Travelling through the community in the aftermath felt like a miracle, but it was one that came about through years of prevention activities.

## Structural fire protection units

Structural fire protection units (SPUs) are widely used within Canada. SPUs are sprinklers that create a defensible space on homes and other structures. They are set up to keep rooftops and surrounding fuels wet, which extinguishes airborne embers, increases humidity and allows the fire to burn around the protected area.

Prior to impact from a firefront, properties are assessed and placed in one of 3 categories:

- Needs little or no protection, for now.
- Needs protection, but is saveable.
- Cannot be saved, lost or too dangerous.

In summer 2021, properties in the remote community of Brookmere that were most at risk from a significant fire front had SPUs installed. When conditions became high risk we retreated and returned the next morning to find that the SPUs had been successful and no structures were lost.

## Fostering a sharing culture

It is important to take the time to share information during deployments and to build relationships after the fact that establish mechanisms for sharing lessons. During summer 2021, recording differences and ideas regularly during deployment with the intent to inform future practice fostered a deep relationship among staff. As a result, staff personnel from Canada and Australia continue to exchange information and work together on issues of mutual concern. Partnerships between Australia and Canada help to boost response efforts to disasters and enable us to be stronger, more efficient and more effective as a global wildfire management system.

## Endnote

1. Beginning in the 19th century, until the last school closed in 1996, Indigenous children in Canada were removed from their families and forced to attend residential schools, mostly operated by churches. Thousands of children never returned home and their families were often given little to no explanation of what happened.