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NEWS RELEASE

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Governments in British Columbia need to be better prepared for major interface fires

VICTORIA— British Columbia has the highest risk of interface fires in Canada because of its climate and topography. And the risks are increasing, says Auditor General Wayne Strelloff, who today released his report into how well governments in British Columbia are prepared for managing major interface fires. Fires involving flammable vegetation such as trees, brush, and grasses are called wildfires. They have been a natural and regular occurrence in British Columbia—and a major hazard—for thousands of years. When wildfires occur in areas where homes, businesses, cottages or other structures are located they are called, "interface fires."

"Although provincial and local governments in British Columbia do many good things to help manage interface fire risks, there is significant room for improvement," says Strelloff whose office conducted extensive interviews with provincial government staff, as well as surveys of local chief administrative officers, fire chiefs, development and planning directors and emergency coordinators.

Two key factors are contributing to the increasing fire risks, Strelloff points out. One is the population growth in areas where interface fires occur. The other is the build-up of combustible vegetation, a consequence of years of fire suppression activities. While relatively few major interface fires occur in the province each year, notes Strelloff, those that do are usually costly in terms of losses suffered by communities and individuals and expenditures for direct fire response.

Effective fire risk management requires provincial and local governments to work together. However, Strelloff found that the roles and responsibilities of key agencies are unclear. He also found a lack of complete and reliable information about past fire events, and relatively low levels of awareness among local governments and residents about the interface fire risks in their areas. In many communities with high or moderate risks, fire prevention work is insufficient, concluded Strelloff, and even where measures aimed at controlling the risk are reported to be in place, non-compliance appears to be a common problem.

Certain aspects of interface fire response planning are done well, as the report describes, but a number of areas need improving. "For example," says Strelloff, "many jurisdictions lack emergency plans, and those plans that do exist often don't deal adequately with interface fires and usually don't address recovery planning." Also, many jurisdictions do not periodically test their ability to respond to a major interface fire, and many local firefighters and emergency responders see a need for improved training and better equipment. In small communities that have no structural fire services or only small volunteer groups, more effort to reduce risks is especially important, adds Strelloff.

The report presents a number of recommendations to the Provincial Emergency Program, the Ministry of Forests Protection Branch, and the Office of the Fire Commissioner. Says Strelloff, "The situation does not call for developing new solutions, but rather for finding ways and the willingness to apply known solutions to the problems that exist."

- 30 -

[2001/2002 Report #1 – Managing Interface Fire Risks](#)

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 [Top of page](#)