



British Columbia's
Office of the Human Rights
Commissioner

RIGHTS IN FOCUS SPOTLIGHT SERIES

Through the haze

A human rights perspective on wildfires
in British Columbia



Spotlight | September 2026

Through the haze

A human rights perspective on wildfires in British Columbia

SPOTLIGHT | SEPTEMBER 2026

British Columbia's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner (BCOHRC) encourages the dissemination and exchange of information presented in this publication. All material presented in this publication is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence with the exception of photographs and images, BCOHRC's logo, any branding or trademarks, content or material provided by third parties and where otherwise indicated. To review the licence, visit: creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/



BCOHRC recognizes the important relationship between protecting the natural environment and protecting human rights. One way we reduce our environmental impact is by limiting print copies of our reports. However, if you have difficulties reading this report in its electronic format, you are welcome to contact our office to request a printed copy.

This publication can be found in electronic format on the website of British Columbia's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner: bchumanrights.ca/spotlight-on-wildfires

ISBN: 978-1-990626-33-3

© **British Columbia's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner**

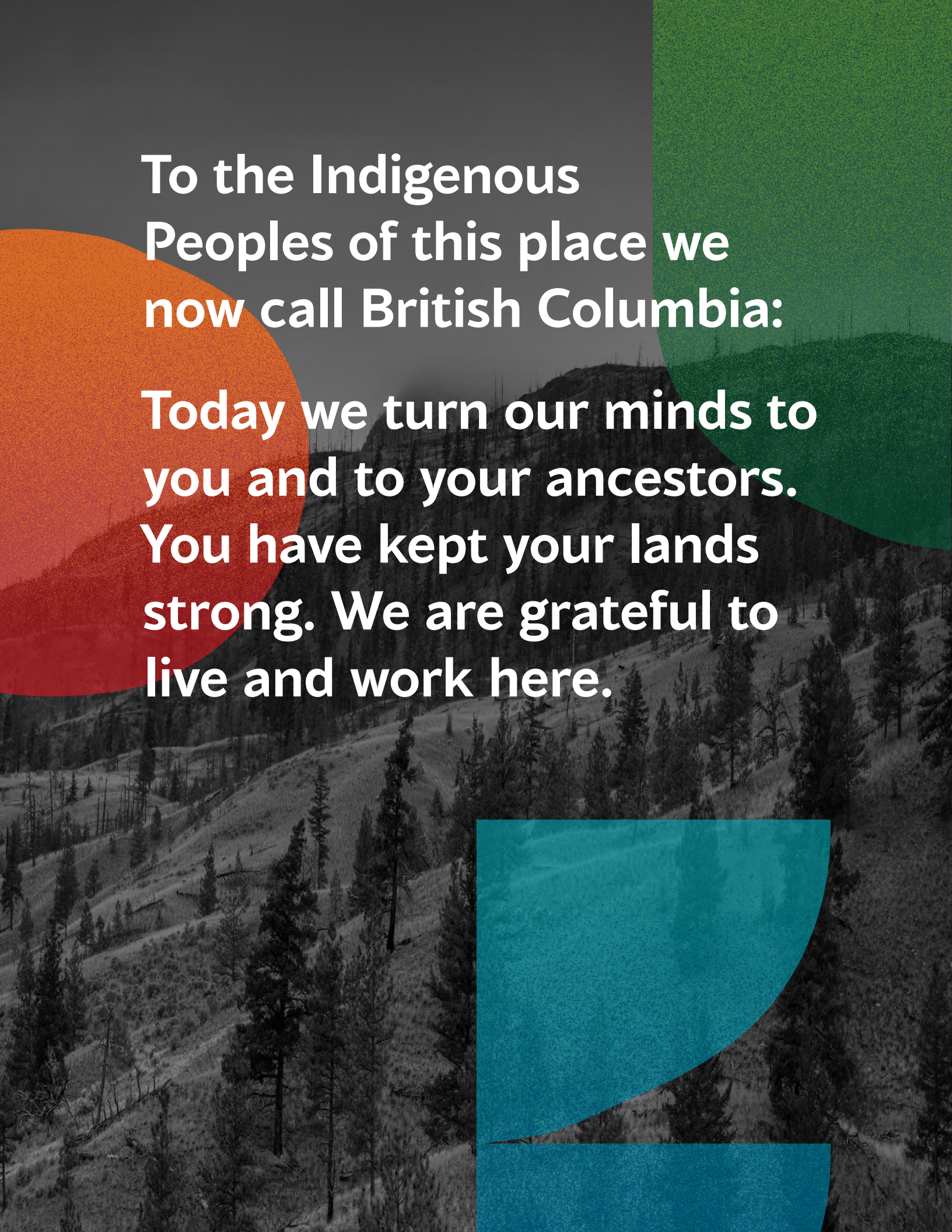
536 - 999 Canada Place

Vancouver, BC V6C 3E1

1-844-922-6472 | info@bchumanrights.ca



British Columbia's
**Office of the Human Rights
Commissioner**



**To the Indigenous
Peoples of this place we
now call British Columbia:**

**Today we turn our minds to
you and to your ancestors.
You have kept your lands
strong. We are grateful to
live and work here.**

Table of contents

Acknowledgements	5
Introduction.....	6
A human rights lens on wildfires	8
The right to equality	8
The rights to life, health and security of the person	10
Indigenous rights	11
Wildfires as a threat to life, health and security of the person	11
Rural and remote community impacts	13
Socio-economic vulnerability: Income, housing and labour precarity	15
Infrastructure disruption and food security	16
Disproportionate impacts and substantive equality	18
Older adults, children and pregnant people	19
People with disabilities	20
Indigenous Peoples	21
Disruption of Indigenous fire stewardship and community-based responses	23
Conclusion.....	30

Acknowledgements

The Human Rights Commissioner is grateful to the people and organizations who shared their expertise and provided feedback on this report, including:

Research participants

We are grateful to the individuals who shared their knowledge, expertise and experiences through interviews and discussions conducted for this report, including:

- Dixon (Richard) Terbasket, Lower Similkameen Indian Band, sməlqmix/syilx territory
- Lauren Terbasket, Lower Similkameen Indian Band, sməlqmix/syilx territory
- Rheana Marchand, Lower Similkameen Indian Band, sməlqmix/syilx territory
- Sue Sterling-Bur, Councillor, Lower Nicola Indian Band
- Dr. Sonja Leverkus, Wildland Fire Specialist, Northern Fire WoRx, and Adjunct Professor, Thompson Rivers University and Simon Fraser University (Fire and Ecosystems Research Lab)
- Dr. Gillian Leverkus, Senior Fire Technician, Northern Fire WoRx
- David Wilmsmeier, Senior Crew Leader and Ignition Operations, Northern Fire WoRx
- Dr. Kelsey Copes-Gerbitz, AFP, Adjunct Professor, UBC Centre for Wildfire Coexistence, and Manager, Wildfire Knowledge Networks and Wildfire Resilience Consortium of Canada
- Dr. Sarah Dickson-Hoyle, Postdoctoral Research and Teaching Fellow, UBC Centre for Wildfire Coexistence
- Dr. Sarah Henderson, Scientific Director, Environmental Health Services, BC Centre for Disease Control
- Scott Barry, Chief Administrative Officer, Northern Rockies Regional Municipality
- Rob Fraser, Mayor, Northern Rockies Regional Municipality
- Barbara Roden, Mayor, Village of Ashcroft

Reviewers

We also thank the following individuals for reviewing an earlier draft of the report and providing expert feedback:

- Dr. Kelsey Copes-Gerbitz, AFP, Adjunct Professor, UBC Centre for Wildfire Coexistence, and Manager, Wildfire Knowledge Networks and Wildfire Resilience Consortium of Canada
- Dr. Sonja Leverkus, Wildland Fire Specialist, Northern Fire WoRx, and Adjunct Professor, Thompson Rivers University and Simon Fraser University (Fire and Ecosystems Research Lab)
- James Whitehead, Special Projects Manager, Mitigating Wildfire Initiative, Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, Simon Fraser University

Staff

Many staff of BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner were involved in this report's development at different times. The Commissioner would like to thank everyone who worked to bring this report to fruition, including the core project team and in particular Neil Nunn, Nav Purewall, Natt Hongdilokkul and Lyle Goldie.

Introduction

Wildfires are an important part of healthy lands, waters and communities across B.C. In recent decades, wildfires in British Columbia have become larger, more severe and more disruptive. The average annual area burned has increased more than tenfold between 2000–2004 and 2020–2024 — from 867 to 9,863 square kilometers per year.

As a result, people across B.C. have experienced threats to their physical safety and mental health, as well as disruptions to housing, health care, transportation, food systems, livelihoods and community life, particularly when wildfires displace entire communities.

There is also an associated economic burden. The Province spent an estimated \$2.25 billion on wildfire suppression in the 2023–2025 period^{1,2} and Health Canada estimates annual costs of wildfire smoke to be between \$410 million and \$1.8 billion for short-term health effects and between \$4.3 and \$19 billion for longer-term effects.³

Notably, however, the impacts of B.C. wildfires are not experienced equally. Some communities are more exposed to wildfires, less able to protect themselves and slower to recover than others, and some, such as Indigenous communities, face additional challenges because of historical and ongoing inequities.

Key factors affecting wildfire preparedness, risk and recovery include geography, income, housing, occupation, age, physical ability, Indigenous identity and whether one lives in a remote or rural community. For example:

- rural and remote communities — where Indigenous people make up a greater share of the population — are disproportionately exposed to wildfires and face unique challenges in responding to them
- children, older adults, people with disabilities and pregnant people are more vulnerable to health issues associated with wildfire smoke
- risks to people with disabilities are intensified when evacuation procedures fail to account for diverse accessibility and mobility needs
- wildfires disrupt Indigenous Peoples' land-based practices and threaten cultural continuity and collective well-being

As this report discusses, many people fit into more than one of these categories, creating overlapping vulnerabilities. And as wildfires become an increasingly persistent feature of life in British Columbia, unequal impacts are becoming more pronounced.

¹ “Wildfire Season Summary,” Government of British Columbia, last modified January 2, 2026, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status/about-bcws/wildfire-history/wildfire-season-summary>.

² Union of BC Municipalities, “Statistics Confirm Devastating 2023 Wildfire Season,” news release, December 20, 2023, <https://www.ubcm.ca/about-ubcm/latest-news/statistics-confirm-devastating-2023-wildfire-season>.

³ “Human health effects of wildfire smoke report summary,” Health Canada, Government of Canada, June 6, 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/health/healthy-living/environment/air-quality/wildfire-smoke/human-health-effects-report-summary.html>.

This report examines wildfires through a human rights lens. It asks three core questions:

- How do wildfires threaten the rights to life, health and security?
- Who is disproportionately affected and why?
- How have historical provincial land management policies and practices — particularly constraints on Indigenous fire stewardship and the prioritization of fire suppression — increased current impacts of wildfires?

To inform this analysis, the report draws on existing research, original quantitative analysis of wildfire exposure across communities and engagement with Indigenous knowledge holders, wildfire specialists, health experts, municipal leaders and practitioners from across the province. Domestic and international human rights law is used throughout the report as an interpretive lens.

Notably, this paper does not cover all causes, impacts or solutions to the problems caused by wildfires in the province. Many important issues — such as fire behaviour, regulation of industry, environmental policy, forestry practices and economic considerations — fall outside the realm of the human rights lens we bring, which is focused on protecting and respecting human dignity.

While a human rights-based analysis is not sufficient to solve the harms caused by fire, understanding the relationship of wildfires to human rights is essential to understanding the problem and addressing the risks and harms.

This report also acknowledges that mixed severity wildfires are a natural feature of many ecosystems and are an important part of healthy lands, waters and communities across B.C. Understanding wildfires as a human rights issue does not replace ecological or technical approaches to wildfire management. Rather, it complements them by focusing attention on how preparedness, risks and impacts are distributed across populations and what obligations governments may have to address foreseeable and unequal harms.

Human rights-based approach (HRBA)

A human rights-based approach seeks to centre the voices of those most marginalized and to make inequality visible in order to redistribute power.

Key principles include:

- indivisibility, inalienability and universality of rights
- intersectional equality and non-discrimination
- meaningful participation, inclusion and empowerment
- transparency and accountability
- rule of law

A human rights lens on wildfires

A human rights-based approach begins from the principle that all people are entitled to live with dignity, safety and equality and to enjoy their rights without discrimination. Duty holders are accountable for respecting, protecting and fulfilling these rights and should ensure the people most affected by policies and decisions have meaningful opportunities to participate in shaping them.

As noted earlier, this paper does not attempt to cover all the causes and impacts of wildfires in this province or potential solutions to the challenges they present. Rather, it focuses on how wildfire risks and impacts engage human rights. A human rights lens becomes relevant when people's ability to enjoy protected rights is affected, when harms fall disproportionately on particular groups or when government decisions influence who is most exposed to risk and who receives adequate and appropriate support.

In British Columbia, wildfire impacts engage a wide range of interconnected human rights. This section focuses on three key areas: the right to equality; the rights to life, health and security of the person; and the distinct rights of Indigenous Peoples. These rights are protected in different ways through international human rights law, the Canadian Constitution and provincial law. Together, these protections underscore that wildfire preparedness, response and recovery must be fair, equitable and attentive to the rights and needs of all people in the province. These legal frameworks are used throughout this report to help inform our analyses and interpretations of human rights obligations in relation to wildfires.

The right to equality

The right to equality is protected in international, constitutional and statutory human rights instruments. Wildfires disproportionately impact some populations based on identity; this engages the state obligation to respect and protect the right to equality, including through land, water and forest-based fire management policies and practices.

Notably, at all three levels of legal protection, it is substantive equality — also known as equity — that is protected. Substantive equality looks at the impact of a law, policy or practice to see whether the outcome is equal for different groups of people, considering social and historical context. It recognizes that equality doesn't always require same treatment; sometimes in order for an outcome to be equal, laws or policies may need to treat people differently based on their needs and circumstances.

International protections for equality

Numerous international treaties confirm the right to equality; prohibit discrimination on the basis of age, race, Indigeneity, sex and disability; and add further considerations to the equity analysis.

For example, both the *Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW)⁴ and the *Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities* (CRPD)⁵ note state obligations to eliminate discrimination against women and people disabilities, respectively, living in rural areas.

Protections for people in rural communities are particularly important in the context of wildfires. Those living outside of cities face significant risks to land, livestock, homes and property, wild animals and human health—and members of protected groups in these settings are particularly vulnerable. These factors engage states' international human rights obligations to prevent discriminatory impacts.

Constitutional protections for equality

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* protects against discrimination on the basis of age, race and ethnic origin, sex and disability.⁶ This means that law, policy and practice in Canada—regardless of which level government is responsible—cannot perpetuate discrimination based on these aspects of our identities (subject to reasonable limits). If a law, policy or practice harms some groups disproportionately—particularly in arbitrary ways that are disconnected from the actual needs and circumstances of the impacted population—this can be a key indicator of substantive inequality.

As described in more detail later on, wildfires disproportionately impact older adults, Indigenous Peoples, people with disabilities, children and pregnant people. Current laws, policies and practices around wildfire management that worsen these unequal impacts—while contributing to increases in the severity of wildfires—may violate the Charter.

Statutory protections for equality

British Columbia's *Human Rights Code* contains similar protections against discrimination by duty holders (including private actors) who provide housing, employment or services that are usually available to the public. While the impacts of wildfires and disproportionate harm to certain communities could engage all three of these areas covered by the Code, provisions relating to services may be most relevant given the role of emergency response services.

Emergency response services must be delivered in an equitable way. Emergency response policies or practices that worsen harmful and disproportionate impacts of wildfire could be contrary to the Code—even if they were created with good intentions and without meaning to cause harm.

⁴ G.A. Res. 34/180, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, A/RES/34/180, art. 14 (Dec. 18, 1979), <https://documents.un.org/doc/resolution/gen/nr0/378/07/pdf/nr037807.pdf>.

⁵ G.A. Res. 61/106, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, A/RES/61/106, arts. 9 and 26 (Dec. 12, 2006), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>.

⁶ *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, Part I of the *Constitution Act*, 1982, being Schedule B to the *Canada Act 1982* (UK), 1982, c 11, s. 15.

It is important to note that a service may violate the Code even if service delivery is only one factor among many contributing to a discriminatory impact and even if it is not the primary contributing factor. This also applies to other equality protections in constitutional and international law. These considerations are particularly relevant for a human rights analysis of wildfires since many factors affect how wildfires will impact communities, including factors that are not within the immediate control of governments.

The rights to life, health and security of the person

Both the Charter and international law protect the right to life and security of the person.

At the international level, protections related to the right to security of the person include:

- the rights to housing and an adequate standard of living protected in the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR)⁷
- the right of children to specialized protections for their life and safety, protected in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*⁸
- the right of Indigenous people to life and physical and mental security, protected in the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP)⁹
- the right to the highest attainable standard of mental and physical health, protected in the ICESCR¹⁰ the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, as protected by a UN General Assembly resolution that is adopted in the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act*,^{11,12} which recognizes that the consequences of environmental damage are often felt most acutely by women and girls, Indigenous Peoples, children, older people and people with disabilities

With regard to the Charter, Section 7 prohibits the state from interfering with people's rights to life and physical and psychological security. However, this law has not yet been interpreted to require government to take proactive steps to protect these rights.

In the context of wildfires, this means that government practice and policy cannot increase risk to life and security of the person, but government is under no obligation under the Charter (as currently interpreted) to take steps to decrease the risk that exists separate and apart from government actions. Determining what is a proactive versus reactive governmental responsibility is challenging because of the complex and interrelated causes of wildfires, which include forest stewardship practices and policies, industrial activities, natural forces such as lightning strikes,

⁷ G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, A/RES/2200A (XXI), art. 11 (Dec. 16, 1966), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>.

⁸ G.A. Res. 44/25, Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25, art. 3, 6, and 19 (Nov. 20, 1989), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.

⁹ G.A. Res. 61/295, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, A/RES/61/295, art. 7 (Sept. 13, 2007), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n06/512/07/pdf/n0651207.pdf>.

¹⁰ A/RES/2200A (XXI), art. 12.

¹¹ G.A. Res 76/300, *The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment*, A/RES/76/300 (July 28, 2022), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n22/442/77/pdf/n2244277.pdf>.

¹² Canadian Environmental Protection Act, S.C. 1999, c. 33.

climate change and individual human behaviour like campfires, cigarettes and open burning.

As noted earlier, however, state action does not need to be the only source of the inequality for a state to be held responsible for alleviating the impact of its laws, policies and practices on the human rights of its citizens.

Indigenous rights

The United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* provides an important human rights framework for wildfire governance and fire stewardship in B.C. Several of its articles affirm the rights of Indigenous Peoples to make decisions in relation to their territories and to otherwise participate in fire and forest management practices. These include provisions relating to:

- self-determination and self-government (Article 4)
- lands and resources (Article 8(2)(b), Article 25, Article 26 and others)
- environmental protection (Article 29)
- consultation and consent (Article 19 and others)
- Indigenous knowledge, cultural traditions and technologies (Article 11(1))

In B.C., these commitments are being advanced through the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* (DRIPA), which commits the provincial government to align its laws and policies with UNDRIP. Implementation of DRIPA has helped to create opportunities for more collaborative approaches to wildfire governance, including greater recognition of Indigenous stewardship, revitalization of cultural burning practices, incorporation of Indigenous knowledge into fire management and increased Indigenous participation in decisions related to wildfire prevention, response, recovery and landscape management.

Wildfires as a threat to life, health and security of the person

Across British Columbia, threats to life, health and security are growing substantially due to wildfire impacts.

Beyond the risk of direct exposure to fire, people also experience harm from smoke inhalation. Between 2013 and 2018, wildfire smoke exposure across Canada resulted in an estimated 2,740 premature deaths annually, alongside significant increases in respiratory illnesses such as asthma,

chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and lung infections.^{13,14,15} Additional harms arise from displacement and disruption of infrastructure, social services, health care and food systems.

Wildfires also contribute to significant mental health concerns.^{16,17,18} The prospect or the experience of displacement, property loss, fear for loved ones and animals and prolonged uncertainty can generate both immediate and long-term psychological harm. As Mayor Barbara Roden of Ashcroft explained, people respond differently to this kind of harm: some seek support immediately while others may take weeks, months or years to process trauma — often after supports are no longer available.

We also heard accounts of “vicarious trauma” or “survivor’s guilt” among people who were not directly evacuated but were nonetheless affected by nearby wildfire events. These impacts were felt acutely by people with connections to the village of Lytton, B.C., which was destroyed by a devastating wildfire in 2021.¹⁹ Mayor Roden described the many connections between surrounding communities and Lytton, noting that while no one living in Ashcroft lost a home, “we all know people who did.” As Sue Sterling-Bur, a Councillor with the Lower Nicola Indian Band in the nearby community of Merritt, described:

“We weren’t physically impacted, like our home and our family. We didn’t lose our homes. We were able to stay in our homes. We had what we needed. But vicarious trauma...through vicarious trauma, we were impacted through with anxiety, depression, etc.”

Research backs up these accounts,²⁰ showing that the trauma associated with wildfires can lead to elevated rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among residents and wildfire responders²¹ as well as to anxiety disorders and depression associated with smoke exposure directly and

¹³ Fay H. Johnston et al., “Climate Change, Landscape Fires, and Human Health: A Global Perspective,” *Annual Review of Public Health* 45, no. 1 (2024): 295–314.

¹⁴ Colleen E. Reid et al., “Critical Review of Health Impacts of Wildfire Smoke Exposure,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 124, no. 9 (2016): 1334.

¹⁵ For international impacts, see Qiang Zhang et al., “Long-Range PM_{2.5} Pollution and Health Impacts from the 2023 Canadian Wildfires,” *Nature* 645, no. 8081 (2025): 672–78.

¹⁶ Fay Johnston et al., “Climate Change, Landscape Fires, and Human Health: A Global Perspective,” *Annual Review of Public Health* 45 (2024): 295–314.

¹⁷ Colleen Cummings Melton et al., “Wildfires and Older Adults: A Scoping Review of Impacts, Risks, and Interventions,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 13 (2023): 6252.

¹⁸ Matthew RG Brown et al., “Mental Health Symptoms Unexpectedly Increased in Students Aged 11–19 Years during the 3.5 Years after the 2016 Fort McMurray Wildfire: Findings from 9,376 Survey Responses,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12 (2021): 676256.

¹⁹ “Surviving the heat: The impacts of the 2021 western heat dome in Canada,” Government of Canada, last modified June 26, 2022, <https://science.gc.ca/site/science/en/blogs/science-health/surviving-heat-impacts-2021-westernheat-dome-canada>.

²⁰ Youn Soo Jung et al., “Fine Particulate Matter From 2020 California Wildfires and Mental Health-Related Emergency Department Visits,” *JAMA Network Open* 8, no. 4 (2025): e253326.

²¹ Sarah Dickson-Hoyle et al., “Wildfire Research and Mental Health: Impacts, Reflections, and a Call to Action,” *Fire Ecology* 22, no. 1 (2026): 20.

the strains of living in wildfire-affected areas more broadly.^{22,23} These impacts are particularly pronounced among women, girls and older adults.²⁴

These conditions and impacts engage our rights to life, health and security of the person, particularly where harms are foreseeable and shaped by gaps in preparedness, infrastructure, emergency response systems and broader social conditions.

Rural and remote community impacts

Wildfires risks, and the corresponding threats to life and security, are not distributed evenly across British Columbia. People living in rural and remote communities experience wildfires five times more often than urban populations and typically face greater barriers to preparedness, evacuation and recovery.

These disparities are shaped in part by geography and infrastructure. For example, rural communities are more likely to be located near forests and areas where the natural environment meets human developments (known as the wildland-urban interface). These locations are where wildfires most commonly occur. In addition, threats posed by wildfires can have particularly catastrophic economic outcomes for these communities — many of which are rooted in resource extraction and agriculture — since economic and intergenerational stability is often tied to land-based assets such as timber, farmland, livestock and multi-generational properties. Limited cellular coverage, unreliable internet service and power outages can also delay warnings and timely access to information, further intensifying these risks.

The failure to account for the unique risks facing rural and remote areas — such as limited evacuation routes or places of cultural significance to First Nations communities — can exacerbate existing inequities for communities already facing heightened wildfire risk and limited ability to prepare for and respond to these events.

These risks are especially pronounced in the rural Northeast region of B.C., where repeated wildfire exposure, infrastructure gaps and limited services compound vulnerability. Since 2000, the average area burned in the Northeast has increased more than twentyfold, compared to a fivefold increase in southern B.C.²⁵ This is due in part to temperatures in the Northeast increasing by 1.6–2.0 degrees

²² Health Canada, *Human Health Effects of Wildfire Smoke* (Health Canada, 2024), <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/hc-sc/documents/services/publications/healthy-living/human-health-effects-wildfire-smoke/human-health-effects-wildfire-smoke.pdf>.

²³ Wanying Mao et al., “Devastating Wildfires and Mental Health: Major Depressive Disorder Prevalence and Associated Factors among Residents in Alberta and Nova Scotia, Canada,” *Behavioral Sciences* 14, no. 3 (2024): 209.

²⁴ Qingyang Zhu et al., “Wildfires Are Associated with Increased Emergency Department Visits for Anxiety Disorders in the Western United States,” *Nature Mental Health* 2, no. 4 (2024): 379–87.

²⁵ These averages were calculated in five-year increments: average area burned increased from 0.063% of total land area in 2000–2004 to 1.330% in 2020–2024 in the Northeast, and from 0.104% to 0.619% over the same periods in Southern B.C. Historically, wildfires were more prevalent in the South than in the North across four consecutive periods (2000–2004, 2005–2009, 2010–2014 and 2015–2019). This pattern reversed in 2020–2024, when wildfire prevalence became substantially higher in Northern B.C.

Smoke and haze fills the sky at Stoddart Creek, B.C. (2023)



Celsius over the past century (double the rate of the south coast)²⁶ and to drought conditions, including record-breaking low snowpack and exceptionally warm spring conditions, which have effectively produced a fire season that never ends.

Risks to life and safety are further heightened by limited evacuation routes, slower emergency response and greater exposure to smoke and fire. Fort Nelson Mayor Rob Fraser echoed a concern widely held by people in the Northeast: that although support has increased, being “geographically the farthest community from Victoria in this province” has played a role in the region receiving inadequate wildfire response and support, even when communities such as Fort Nelson serve as important infrastructure corridors.

Socio-economic vulnerability: Income, housing and labour precarity

Wildfire risks are also shaped by socioeconomic conditions, including poverty, housing precarity and labour insecurity. In 2018, one in nine people in Canada lived in poverty.²⁷ Poverty is not experienced equally: Indigenous people, refugees, people with disabilities and single-mother-led households are disproportionately represented among those living on low incomes or in poverty due to historical and systemic factors.

Socioeconomic conditions influence who is able to prepare for, respond to and recover from wildfire events, with significant implications for physical and mental health, displacement rates and mortality.^{28,29} For example, without financial resources, people may not have adequate home insurance or the ability to mitigate wildfire impacts through relocation or access to air conditioners and air purification systems.^{30,31} In addition, research indicates that living in poverty can limit a person’s ability to evacuate safely and respond in ways that mitigate harms.³²

People who are unhoused, precariously housed or living in older or poorly constructed housing are the least able to protect themselves from both acute and prolonged smoke exposure, one of

²⁶ Overall B.C.’s climate has become hotter, drier and more fire-prone, with increased atmospheric dryness and reduced snowpack and rainfall in some regions. These changes dry vegetation, extend fire seasons and increase fuel flammability, increasing the probability of high intensity fires; see Steve Taylor et al., “Wildfires,” in *Resilient Pathways Report: Co-Creating New Knowledge for Understanding Risk and Resilience in British Columbia*, ed. Sahar Safaie et al. (Geological Survey of Canada, 2022), 6. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2022/rncan-nrcan/m183-2/M183-2-8910-eng.pdf.

²⁷ Sahar Safaie and Fiona Dercole, “Strategic Summary for Policy Makers” in *Resilient Pathways Report: Co-Creating New Knowledge for Understanding Risk and Resilience in British Columbia*, ed. Sahar Safaie et al. (Geological Survey of Canada, 2022), 5.

²⁸ Public Health Agency of Canada. *Public Health Risk Profile: Wildfires in Canada*, 2023 (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2023), 3.

²⁹ Geneviève Belleville et al., “Psychological Symptoms among Evacuees from the 2016 Fort McMurray Wildfires: A Population-Based Survey One Year Later,” *Frontiers in Public Health* 9 (2021): 655357.

³⁰ Ian P. Davies et al., “The Unequal Vulnerability of Communities of Color to Wildfire,” *PloS One* 13, no. 11 (2018): e0205825.

³¹ Julie A. Gonzalez and Dana R. Fisher, “Wildfire Displacement in the United States: A Qualitative Synthesis of the Social Consequences,” *Environmental Research: Climate* 5 (2026): 025005.

³² Alice Fothergill and Lori A. Peek, “Poverty and Disasters in the United States: A Review of Recent Sociological Findings,” *Natural Hazards* 32, no. 1 (2004): 89–110.

the most widespread and persistent ways that wildfires impact human health.³³ The BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) has noted that sealed housing, access to air purification and timely air quality information are key protective factors—yet these are not equally accessible by everyone in British Columbia. Those who lack access to these protections and who are repeatedly exposed to wildfire smoke, even at lower concentrations,³⁴ can experience inflammation and oxidative stress that can disrupt cellular processes for weeks, months or years after an event.³⁵

Outdoor labourers are also significantly impacted during periods of heavy smoke. Our research found that too often, personal protective equipment is inadequately supplied and employer-provided housing lacks important protective measures such as air filtration or air conditioning. In one case, we heard of a worker who had purchased an air-conditioning unit but was not permitted to use it by their employer due to electricity costs. Without these measures, workers have to choose between opening windows to manage heat or keeping them closed to limit smoke exposure. In these cases of labour-related vulnerability, we heard that enforcement of labour protections is inconsistent and that occupational health and safety standards have not kept pace with the realities of wildfire smoke exposure. For migrant workers, language barriers and limited knowledge of rights can also reduce workers' abilities to mitigate exposure or raise concerns about unsafe working conditions.^{36,37}

Taken together, the conditions described in this subsection show how socioeconomic inequality functions as a key determinant of wildfire-related harm, clearly engaging the rights to life, physical and mental security and the highest attainable standard of health.

Infrastructure disruption and food security

Infrastructure systems that support transportation, energy, communications, health care and food distribution are essential for community well-being, health and safety. Wildfires put these vital systems at risk, especially in rural and remote communities, where access to food and essential infrastructure can shift rapidly and unpredictably during wildfire events.

One significant example of this is when electricity is cut off due to wildfires in the region. Loss of power has wide-reaching implications for numerous infrastructure systems, including:

- community water and wastewater treatment (well pumps for homes, farms and ranches; waste and septic systems)
- communications (internet, telephone and radio services)
- hospitals and health clinics, as well as personal medical equipment

³³ Calum Cunningham et al., "Pyrogeography of Extraordinary Wildfires," EarthArXiv (2025), <https://eartharxiv.org/repository/view/11239>.

³⁴ Sarah B. Henderson et al., "The Public Health Paradox of Wildfire Smoke," *BCMJ* 66 (2024): 93.

³⁵ Dr. Sarah Henderson, interview by BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, October 28, 2025, Vancouver, BC.

³⁶ Migrant worker advocate, interview by BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, December 11, 2025.

³⁷ CBC News, "B.C. Wildfires, Extreme Conditions Leave Some Migrant Workers in a Jam," British Columbia, *CBC News*, August 23, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/migrant-workers-wildfires-extreme-conditions-1.6943325>.

- transportation (traffic signals, highway message boards, railway crossings and fuel pumps at gas stations)
- agricultural infrastructure (refrigeration for milk, meat, produce and medications; climate-control and ventilation systems for greenhouses and barns; and other automated systems for livestock and crops)
- financial and commercial services (banking and payment systems, grocery stores and food storage facilities)

Another key example relates to food distribution. As Councillor Sterling-Bur described, wildfire conditions can create uncertainty about where and how communities will access food:

“And then where do we go? At that point, we were worried about food and where were we going to get food. Because the grocery stores were all closed. Kamloops was cleared out. Kelowna was cleared out. It was really bad. I remember going through everything we had in this house.... I figured we had 21 days ... I never had to do that before in my life.”

For Councillor Sterling-Bur’s Nation, food access is not only a matter of grocery supply but also deeply connected to land-based food practices and cultural continuity. These include harvesting, hunting, fishing and gathering practices that have been sustained across generations. When these practices are disrupted, the impacts extend beyond food access alone, affecting collective well-being, cultural continuity and mental health. As Councillor Sterling-Bur explained:

“We had no access to many of our foods for hunting, fishing, berry picking ... It impacted being able to come together collectively as a nation and support one another through the trauma. Mental health just skyrocketed with really challenging mental health situations.”

Recent wildfire seasons have also revealed how emergency systems themselves are reliant on centralized food distribution, supply chains, energy systems and transportation corridors that are vulnerable to disruption during intense fires.³⁸ As Mayor Fraser noted, worst-case scenarios are not hypothetical. In 2024, Fort Nelson faced high-intensity wildfires on all sides of the city, lost power and came close to having all evacuation routes cut off.

Some communities have found ways to mitigate food insecurity and infrastructure vulnerability through local food systems and strong community networks.³⁹ In Ashcroft for instance, Mayor Roden described how proximity to regional food producers helped mitigate food insecurity during wildfire events:

³⁸ Dawn Hoogeveen et al., *Climate Change, Intersectionality, and GBA+ in British Columbia: Summary Report* (Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy, SFU and SHIFT, 2021), https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/climate-change/adaptation/resources/climate_change_gba_in_bc_summary_report.pdf.

³⁹ Mayor Barbara Roden, interview by BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, November 14, 2025, Ashcroft, BC.

“...food insecurity is certainly a worry. We’re very fortunate in our area that we do have places like Desert Hills. We have Horstings Farm Market to the north near Cache Creek. We’ve got Hilltop Gardens down at Spencer’s Bridge. So, these are all people who grow fantastic produce right in our neighbourhood. It’s readily available. It’s inexpensive.”

Mayor Roden also emphasized the importance of strong social ties in helping buffer crisis impacts, pointing to the aftermath of the tragic Lytton wildfire, where connections between the two communities and huge “outpourings of support, of people coming together” helped to absorb the impacts of the tragedy.⁴⁰

Disproportionate impacts and substantive equality

In addition to certain communities being disproportionately exposed to wildfires, some people may face heightened risks of harm because of health, social or other factors that shape how they experience and are able to respond to wildfire impacts.^{41,42} As this paper has described, existing social and economic inequalities shape who is most exposed to wildfires, who is able to respond effectively and who faces the greatest barriers to recovery. In other words, the rights to physical and psychological safety cannot be neatly separated from broader patterns of inequality or from the right to substantive equality.

In this section, we detail disproportionate impacts of wildfires on older adults, children, pregnant people, Indigenous people and people with disabilities — particularly those living in rural communities or in poverty — who may face overlapping risks and the most severe consequences of wildfires.⁴³

The impacts we describe arise from the interaction of social, economic, geographic and institutional conditions rather than any single factor in isolation. They also reinforce the importance of a substantive equality framework, including the need to pay attention to how structural conditions produce unequal outcomes in practice.

⁴⁰ See also Kacia Tolsma, *Climate Change, Equity, and COVID-19: Considerations in a Changing World*, (Simon Fraser University Faculty of Environment, 2020), 10.

⁴¹ Alexandra D. Syphard et al., “The Relationship between Social Vulnerability and Wildfire Structure Loss across California,” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* (2026): 106066

⁴² Brianna Baker et al., “Social Inequity and Wildfire Response: Identifying Gaps and Interventions in Ventura County, California,” *Fire* 7, no. 2 (2024): 41.

⁴³ Public Health Agency of Canada. *Rapid Review: An Intersectional Analysis of the Disproportionate Health Impacts of Wildfires on Diverse Populations and Communities* (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024).

Older adults, children and pregnant people

Children, older adults and pregnant people face disproportionately high risks to their health during wildfire events. Their bodies may be more sensitive than others to smoke and heat, their typical activities and environments may make it more difficult to avoid pollutants and they may have to rely more on health care and support systems.⁴⁴

Older adults are particularly vulnerable to respiratory and cardiovascular impacts and death associated with wildfire smoke^{45,46} and may face additional challenges related to mobility,⁴⁷ health care access and evacuation.⁴⁸ They may also need reliable and continuous care to function or survive, which can be disrupted during a wildfire.⁴⁹

These risks may be intensified by older adults' geographic locations. Older adults make up a significantly large proportion of the population in many rural communities—approximately 25 per cent of the rural population compared to 19 per cent in urban areas. As a result, the already disproportionate impacts experienced by rural residents are further compounded by age.⁵⁰

Older adults may also face barriers to accessing timely and accurate information on the status of an emergency or how to respond to an emergency. Rural areas are much more likely to experience gaps in reliable internet connectivity,⁵¹ while digital platforms used for emergency communication, like smartphones, apps or social media, may not be accessible or familiar to all older adults. As Mayor Roden explained, the use of digital tools “doesn’t come naturally to a lot of people who didn’t grow up with that technology.” She notes, “if you didn’t grow up with that [technology] it’s not necessarily the first place you turn.”

For children, wildfire smoke can be especially dangerous because their lungs, immune systems and respiratory systems are still developing. They also inhale more air relative to their body weight and often spend more time outdoors where they are more physically active, leading to deeper inhalation and greater penetration of airborne pollutants into the lungs.⁵² In addition, recent research from Fort McMurray shows significant mental health impacts among Grade 7–12 students, with one-third showing signs of PTSD 18 months after a fire—far above typical levels, even when compared to other disasters. Rates of PTSD, depression and anxiety were also found to increase over time rather than decline.⁵³

⁴⁴ Public Health Agency of Canada, *Rapid Review*.

⁴⁵ Sofia L. Vega et al., “Wildfire Smoke Exposure and Cause-Specific Hospitalization in Older Adults,” *JAMA Network Open* 8, no. 4 (2025): e257956.

⁴⁶ Health Canada, *Human Health Effects of Wildfire Smoke* (Health Canada, 2024), <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/hc-sc/documents/services/publications/healthy-living/human-health-effects-wildfire-smoke/human-health-effects-wildfire-smoke.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Colleen Cummings Melton et al., “Wildfires and Older Adults,” 6252.

⁴⁸ Colleen Cummings Melton et al., “Wildfires and Older Adults,” 6252.

⁴⁹ Evalyna Bogdan et al. “Disaster Awareness and Preparedness Among Older Adults in Canada Regarding Floods, Wildfires, and Earthquakes.” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science* 15, no. 2 (2024): 198–212.

⁵⁰ Many rural communities with recent high wildfire exposure illustrate this: 37.4 per cent in Ashcroft are 65 and over, 33.3 per cent in Lytton, 33.8 per cent in 100 Mile House and 31.4 per cent in Cache Creek.

⁵¹ “Connectivity Coverage in B.C.,” Government of British Columbia, accessed April 22, 2026, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/connectivity-in-bc/20358>.

⁵² “Wildfires and Health,” Climate, Kids, and Health, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, <https://hsph.harvard.edu/research/climate-health-c-change/climate-kids-and-health/wildfires-and-health/>.

⁵³ Matthew RG Brown et al., “Mental Health Symptoms Unexpectedly Increased,” 676256.

Wildfire smoke also poses significant risks during pregnancy.⁵⁴ Fine particulate matter in wildfire smoke — particularly airborne particles 2.5 micrometers or smaller — can trigger inflammation and oxidative stress that affects fetal development and nutrient and oxygen exchange.⁵⁵ Furthermore, hypertensive disorders, respiratory stress, stress and anxiety can all impact birth outcomes,⁵⁶ leading to issues like low birth weight,⁵⁷ preterm birth, impacts on lung development and increased risks of respiratory disease later in life.^{58,59} To reduce these risks, pregnant people are often advised to avoid exposure to wildfire smoke, including by limiting time outdoors.⁶⁰ These constraints — which affect how people access medical services, social connection, employment or other benefits outside the home — may create additional burdens for pregnant people and may intersect with existing gender and socioeconomic inequalities.

People with disabilities

People with disabilities — who make up approximately 28.6 per cent of the population in B.C.⁶¹ — face disproportionate risks⁶² during wildfire events due to systemic barriers that affect preparedness, evacuation and recovery.

These risks are often intensified by communication gaps during evacuations^{63,64,65} and disruptions to transportation, medical supports, mobility aids, medications and reliable access to urgent and primary care.⁶⁶ Evacuation processes in particular often fail to account for diverse accessibility needs, creating additional risks for individuals who require support to move safely or maintain continuity of care.

⁵⁴ BC Centre for Disease Control. *Wildfire Smoke and Pregnancy* (BC Centre for Disease Control, 2024), https://www.bccdc.ca/resource-gallery/Documents/Guidelines%20and%20Forms/Guidelines%20and%20Manuals/Health-Environment/BCCDC_WildFire_FactSheet_Pregnancy.pdf.

⁵⁵ Hannelore Bové et al., “Ambient Black Carbon Particles Reach the Fetal Side of Human Placenta,” *Nature Communications* 10, no. 1 (2019): 3866.

⁵⁶ Tong Zhang et al., “Gestational Exposure to Wildfire PM_{2.5} and Its Specific Components and the Risk of Gestational Hypertension and Eclampsia in the Southwestern United States,” *Science of The Total Environment* 951 (2024): 175781.

⁵⁷ Dawn Hoogeveen, *Climate Change, Intersectionality, and GBA+*, 7.

⁵⁸ Emilia Basilio et al., “Wildfire Smoke Exposure during Pregnancy: A Review of Potential Mechanisms of Placental Toxicity, Impact on Obstetric Outcomes, and Strategies to Reduce Exposure,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 21 (2022): 13727.

⁵⁹ Tessa Wardle et al., “Narrative Review of Wildfire Smoke Interventions: Considering the Unique Vulnerabilities of Children and Pregnant Individuals,” *Journal of Exposure Science & Environmental Epidemiology* 36, no. 3 (2026): 1–16.

⁶⁰ BC Centre for Disease Control, *Wildfire Smoke and Pregnancy*.

⁶¹ “New Data on Disability in Canada, 2022,” Statistics Canada, Government of Canada, release December 1, 2023, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2023063-eng.htm>.

⁶² Public Health Agency of Canada, *Wildfires in Canada: Toolkit for Public Health Authorities* (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024).

⁶³ Carolina Tannenbaum-Baruchi et al., “Risk Inclusion of Vulnerable People during a Climate-Related Disaster: A Case Study of People with Hearing Loss Facing Wildfires,” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 103 (2024): 104335.

⁶⁴ Tabassum Zarin and Erin O’Connell, “Inclusive Wildfire Disaster Communication and Evacuation: Addressing Accessibility Needs in British Columbia,” *Canadian Geographies / Géographies Canadiennes* 70, no. 1 (2026): e70059.

⁶⁵ Dulce Gonzalez et al., *Environmental Disasters and Extreme Weather Had Disproportionate Impacts on Disabled Adults in 2023* (Urban Institute, 2025).

⁶⁶ Public Health Agency of Canada, *Wildfires in Canada: Toolkit*.

Disability prevalence is higher in rural areas, partly due to older population profiles⁶⁷ and higher rates of injury and chronic health conditions.⁶⁸ In regions where wildfire exposure is also elevated, these vulnerabilities can intersect with and compound wildfire-related risks — including those associated with evacuation, smoke exposure and disruptions to health care — leading to higher rates of mortality.^{69,70}

People who are immunocompromised or living with chronic respiratory or cardiovascular conditions face heightened risks, especially as these vulnerabilities often intersect with mobility challenges, significant health care needs and increased sensitivity to smoke exposure.⁷¹

An investigation by the BC Ombudsperson identified the strenuous and complex process of accessing emergency supports as a significant barrier that increases challenges for people with disabilities.⁷² Emergency systems that are not designed with accessibility in mind can unintentionally deepen existing inequalities during wildfire events.

Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous people are overrepresented in rural and remote communities where wildfire exposure is highest. Moreover, communities on Indigenous reserves are more than four times as likely to directly encounter wildfires than non-reserve communities, and 41.9 per cent of all evacuations occur in majority Indigenous communities.⁷³

Between 2000 and 2024, Indigenous reserves accounted for 36 of the 37 communities where wildfires burned at least half of the total land area. The only non-reserve community, the town of Lytton, had a 30.1 per cent Indigenous population. Concerningly, the number of communities affected has been increasing over this period: two communities experienced wildfires this significant in the first five years of this period compared to 17 in the final five years. Wildfire impacts extend beyond physical damage for many Indigenous Peoples and include impacts related to land-based practices, cultural continuity, collective well-being and intergenerational knowledge.

Hunting, fishing, harvesting and the gathering of medicines are integral not only to subsistence,

⁶⁷ Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, *Disability in Canada: A 2006 Profile* (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2011).

⁶⁸ Felix Bang et al., “The Rural-Urban Gap: Differences in Injury Characteristics,” *Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention in Canada: Research, Policy and Practice* 39, no. 12 (2019): 317–322, <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/reports-publications/health-promotion-chronic-disease-prevention-canada-research-policy-practice/vol-39-no-12-2019/original-quantitative-research-rural-urban-gap-injury-characteristics.html>.

⁶⁹ David Alexander et al., “Disability and Disaster,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Hazards and Disaster Risk Reduction*, ed. Benjamin Wisner et al. (Routledge, 2012).

⁷⁰ Alireza Ermagun and Fatemeh Janatabadi, “Compound Risk of Wildfire and Inaccessible Shelters Is Disproportionately Impacting Disadvantaged Communities,” *Progress in Disaster Science* 23 (2024): 100358.

⁷¹ Health Canada, *Human Health Effects of Wildfire Smoke*.

⁷² British Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson, *Fairness in a Changing Climate: Ensuring Disaster Supports Are Accessible, Equitable and Adaptable* (British Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson, 2023), https://bcombudsperson.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/OMB-FireFlood_report_web.pdf.

⁷³ This higher rate of Indigenous communities encountering wildfire is reflected in national evacuation data. For example, a 2019 Government of Canada study found that “people living on First Nations reserves in Canada are 18 times more likely to be evacuated as a result of disasters such as wildfires, floods and severe storms, compared to people living off-reserve.” See Minister of Finance, *Investing in the Middle Class: Budget 2019* (Department of Finance Canada, 2019), 141, <https://www.budget.canada.ca/2019/docs/plan/toc-tdm-en.html>.

but also to cultural identity, intergenerational knowledge transmission and community cohesion. When traditional territories and lands are damaged, there are deep social, cultural, material and psychological consequences.

A BC Ombudsperson investigation found that 25 per cent of Indigenous people surveyed — compared to one per cent overall — reported impacts on their ability to practice cultural and traditional activities following disasters.⁷⁴ As Lauren Terbasket from the Similkameen Nation described, for people with generations-long connections to place, the unanswerable question is, “if our land burns, where do we go? Where do we go?”

One community-engaged wildfire specialist we spoke with described the impacts of displacement on First Nations communities:

“Communities are having weeks and weeks evacuated from their community, scattered around the province and disconnected from family. But particularly for many of the communities or Nations that I work with, something that often comes up is that inability to get out on the land during summer, even into the fall at many times ... those other impacts to ... connection to the land, community health and well-being, they’re a lot harder to quantify, but they’re just as important.”⁷⁵

Evacuations from remote communities often involve relocation to distant urban centres, sometimes thousands of kilometres away. This displacement can separate people from family, community supports and access to land, while disrupting access to housing, health care and culturally responsive services. These disruptions can have significant mental health and well-being effects, particularly when evacuation arrangements are prolonged or arrangements do not support cultural safety, community connection and continuity of care. Additionally, a recent joint report by the Office of the Federal Housing Advocate and Assembly of First Nations found that prolonged displacement can increase the risks of housing precarity and homelessness and that evacuation experiences can undermine dignity, safety and the equal enjoyment of the right to housing.⁷⁶ Evacuations from First Nations communities to urban centres can also create heightened risks of violence, substance use and human trafficking.^{77,78,79} Councillor Darrin Spence of the Marten Falls

⁷⁴ British Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson. *Fairness in a Changing Climate*.

⁷⁵ BC wildfire specialist, interview by BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, November 2025, Vancouver, BC.

⁷⁶ Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, *Maintaining the Right to Housing in a Changing Climate: Wildfire Displacement, Fire Mortality, and Emergency Management in First Nations Communities*, (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2026), <https://www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/resources/publications/maintaining-right-housing-changing-climate>.

⁷⁷ Kathryn Mannie, “First Nation evacuees fleeing wildfire face safety risks in Toronto, leaders say,” *The Canadian Press*, July 24, 2026.

⁷⁸ Dave Baxter, “Wildfire evacuees face new threats in Winnipeg, including drug dealers: grand chief,” *CBC News*, July 15, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/wildfires-evacuees-dangers-winnipeg-1.7585713>.

⁷⁹ CBC News, “Drug dealers taking advantage of evacuees, Tataskweyak man says after 2 charged with trafficking near hotels,” *CBC News*, July 9, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/cocaine-trafficking-wildfire-evacuation-sites-winnipeg-1.7580756>.

First Nation in Ontario noted that while their community has not lost lives directly to wildfire, they have lost lives as a result of evacuation to urban centres.⁸⁰

Our research found systemic challenges for recovery and preparedness for First Nation communities on reserve including gaps in infrastructure and emergency response. The Federal Housing Advocate and Assembly of First Nations similarly found that longstanding housing and infrastructure deficits can undermine First Nations' capacity to protect their communities from climate-related disasters, while the failure to recognize First Nations' jurisdiction can create additional barriers to effective emergency response.⁸¹ The Auditor General of Canada identified persistent gaps and coordination challenges in emergency management services for First Nation communities where responsibilities are shared across multiple jurisdictions. These jurisdictional and coordination challenges can contribute to delays and compound inequities experienced by Indigenous communities following wildfire and other disasters. Participants interviewed for this report also described accounts of racism Indigenous leaders experienced when seeking services during emergencies. This is confirmed by a BC Ombudsperson report that found 26 per cent of Indigenous questionnaire participants, compared to eight per cent overall, reported experiencing discrimination or harassment when accessing emergency support services.⁸²

Disruption of Indigenous fire stewardship and community-based responses

Current wildfire risks in British Columbia cannot be understood solely as the result of natural environmental processes or human-caused climate change. They are also influenced by historical and ongoing governance systems that have shaped ecosystems. From a human rights perspective, one of the most significant of these changes has been the disruption of Indigenous fire stewardship practices through colonial law and policy. There is a growing global scientific agreement that the suppression of Indigenous fire stewardship — alongside other significant factors like vegetation mismanagement and expanding settlement into the wildland-urban interface and changing climates — has contributed to current increases in wildfire impacts.^{83,84}

It is well documented that prior to colonial settlement, Indigenous fire stewardship helped to maintain ecological balance through a mixed severity fire regime (that is, fires of varying

⁸⁰ Amy Cardinal Chirstianson and Darrin Spence, "Addressing Systemic Racism in Canada," interview by Willow Fiddler, *Finding Common Ground: Systemic Racism in Canada*, Globe and Mail, November 27, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSNAN9WvjN4>.

⁸¹ Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, *Maintaining the Right to Housing in a Changing Climate*.

⁸² British Columbia Office of the Ombudsperson, *Fairness in a Changing Climate*, 108.

⁸³ Kira M. Hoffman et al., "Conservation of Earth's Biodiversity Is Embedded in Indigenous Fire Stewardship," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 32 (2021): e2105073118;

⁸⁴ Calum Cunningham et al., "Pyrogeography."

frequency and severity that help create more diverse forest conditions).^{85,86} The disruption of this stewardship through colonial prohibitions on cultural burning, spread of disease and displacement of Indigenous Peoples led to denser forests, changes in wildfire behaviour and greater impacts on human communities. The loss of fire stewardship practices — which helped manage fuel loads and maintain more fire-resilient landscapes — has contributed to conditions that increase wildfire severity and vulnerability in Indigenous communities and more broadly.⁸⁷

There are two notable human rights impacts flowing from this disruption of fire stewardship practices. First, the experience and expertise of Indigenous Peoples is undervalued or ignored, which undermines their rights to substantive equality and self determination. And second, governments' failure to adopt the most effective fire management practices impacts wildfire itself and therefore undermines all of our rights to physical security, life and the highest attainable standard of health.

Legislation such as the *Bush Fire Act* of 1874⁸⁸ introduced fines or imprisonment for unauthorized burning, effectively criminalizing Indigenous fire stewardship and marking a shift toward colonial fire suppression.⁸⁹ This approach was reinforced by the 1912 *BC Forest Act*, which prioritized only certain colonial approaches to wildfire prevention and suppression in the service of protecting forests as a resource, to the exclusion of Indigenous approaches such as preventative burning.^{90,91} Together, these frameworks expanded provincial authority over fire and permitted only state-authorized fire management, further marginalizing stewardship burning practices.^{92,93,94} Fire was recast as a threat to be eliminated rather than a feature of healthy ecosystems and a tool for maintaining them. The consequences of this longstanding emphasis on fire suppression continue to be felt today. A recent report from the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry identified Canada's colonial history of fire suppression as a barrier to wildfire resilience and forest regeneration. As wildfire researcher Lori Daniels told the Committee, "Fire suppression has contributed in part to the intensity, size and the lack of ability to control the fires we are now experiencing".⁹⁵

⁸⁵ Nancy J. Turner, "'Time to Burn': Traditional Use of Fire to Enhance Resource Production by Aboriginal Peoples in British Columbia," *Indians, Fire and the Land in the Pacific Northwest* (1999): 185–218.

⁸⁶ Kelsey Copes-Gerbitz et al., "The Contribution of Indigenous Stewardship to an Historical Mixed-Severity Fire Regime in British Columbia, Canada," *Ecological Applications* 33, no. 1 (2023): e2736.

⁸⁷ Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Canada on Fire: The Catastrophic and Escalating Effects of Wildfires on Lives and Communities* (Senate of Canada, 2026), 16, 81–82.

⁸⁸ The full name of this legislation was the 1874 *Act to Prevent the Careless Use of Fire in Woods and Forests*.

⁸⁹ These efforts to suppress fire have been very successful: since the 1940s, 92 per cent of fires were contained before exceeding four hectares. See Wesley Brookes et al. "A Disrupted Historical Fire Regime in Central British Columbia," *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 9 (2021): 676961.

⁹⁰ British Columbia, An Act Respecting Forests and Crown Timber Lands, and the Conservation and Preservation of Standing Timber, and the Regulation of Commerce in Timber and Products of the Forest, *Statutes of the Province of British Columbia*, 1912, chap. 17, 81–132.

⁹¹ Royal Commission of Inquiry on Timber and Forestry, *Final Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Timber and Forestry, 1909–1910* (Province of British Columbia, 1910).

⁹² Bush Fire Act, S.B.C. 1874, c. 6.

⁹³ Kelsey Copes-Gerbitz et al., "Transforming Fire Governance in British Columbia, Canada: An Emerging Vision for Coexisting with Fire," *Regional Environmental Change* 22, no. 2 (2022): 48, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-022-01895-2>.

⁹⁴ Jocelyn Stacey et al., "Reclaiming Fire: Resistance, Resurgence and Indigenous Jurisdiction in the Climate Emergency," *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 1, (2025): 1–20.

⁹⁵ Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Canada on Fire*. 81.

A cultural spring burn at Little Chopaka Mountain (2025)



Recent years have seen a shift toward greater recognition of addressing wildfires in a way that prioritizes Indigenous knowledge. This shift is evident in the Secwepemcúl'ecw Restoration and Stewardship Society's 2021 wildfire report⁹⁶ and the 2016 Nenqay Deni Accord between the Tsilhqot'in Nation and British Columbia,⁹⁷ both of which followed catastrophic wildfire seasons and laid the groundwork for Indigenous-led long-term collaborative land restoration, mitigation and recovery. These initiatives, alongside co-management agreements such as the Haida Gwaii Response and Fire Management Plan,⁹⁸ are meaningful examples of an evolving approach to wildfire governance that increasingly recognizes Indigenous jurisdiction, leadership and knowledge. Programs such as the Cooperative Community Wildfire Response initiative also signal movement by the provincial government toward more collaborative approaches with Indigenous and rural communities, and include training and supporting community response groups, integrating Indigenous and local knowledge into wildfire management and developing partnerships with First Nations and rural communities.^{99,100}

However, while many people we spoke with acknowledged the meaningful progress and were supportive of continuing and growing this work, we repeatedly heard about tensions between Indigenous or community-based wildfire knowledge and centralized provincial governance systems that place rigid constraints on the application of traditional and place-based knowledge and skills.¹⁰¹ The direct application of community-level knowledge and efforts in wildfire suppression and mitigation is limited under the *Wildfire Act*, which continues to require that non-government personnel only be engaged when BC Wildfire Service (BCWS) or contracted crews are not available in the area.¹⁰² This means that Indigenous and local efforts and knowledge can only be directly involved in wildfire suppression or mitigation after being hired by the province, which poses a notable barrier.

There are also significant constraints on how communities can participate in mitigative and fire stewardship projects on Crown land, which makes up approximately 95 per cent of B.C.'s land base. They may only engage in these projects if they have provincial approval, aligned funding and professional oversight and if they comply with BC Wildfire Service standards.¹⁰³ As one wildfire specialist noted:

⁹⁶ Sarah Dickson-Hoyle and Char John, *Elephant Hill: Secwépemc Leadership and Lessons Learned from the Collective Story of Wildfire Recovery* (Secwepemcúl'ecw Restoration and Stewardship Society, 2021), <https://www.preventionweb.net/quick/68638>.

⁹⁷ Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, "Tsilhqot'in and B.C. Sign Historic Accord," news release, February 12, 2016, <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2016ARR0019-000206>.

⁹⁸ Haida Gwaii Natural Resource District Response Fire Management Plan, 2024-2025, Council of the Haida Nation - Haida Gwaii Natural Resource District - Coastal Fire Centre, BC Wildfire Service, July 22, 2024.

⁹⁹ "How We Work with Rural and Remote Firefighters: Cooperative Community Wildfire Response Groups," Wildfire Service, Government of British Columbia, last modified February 10, 2026, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status/partners/community-response-groups>.

¹⁰⁰ Section 31.1 was added as part of the 2023 *Wildfire Act* amendments that came into force on Nov. 30, 2023. These amendments were introduced alongside the new s. 60 agreement-making authority and were designed to support cultural and prescribed fire. While they were viewed as a step in the right direction, participants also expressed uncertainty about what they mean in practice, including the level of authority they grant and the extent to which they guarantee jurisdiction for Nations.

¹⁰¹ The BC Wildfire Service and BC Cattlemen's Association joint rancher liaison program is another example of where this tension exists.

¹⁰² "How We Work with Rural and Remote Firefighters," para 3.

¹⁰³ "Tools for Fuel Management," Wildfire Service, Government of British Columbia, accessed May 15, 2026, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status/prevention/fire-fuel-management/fuel-management>.

“Right now, while there’s Indigenous communities, local communities, all kinds of communities really demanding to be at the table in terms of decision-making, we don’t really have necessarily good structures in place to allow that to occur. And so I think that’s really one of the areas that we still see disproportionate impacts. We see communities who struggle to have their expertise recognized.”¹⁰⁴

We heard about this pitfall several times: Participants described tensions between provincial governance frameworks and community efforts to apply local and Indigenous knowledge in wildfire mitigation and response.^{105,106,107,108,109,110,111} For decades, many communities have advocated for more localized fuel management,¹¹² but while the provincial government has expressed support in principle, proposed projects must still be approved through multiple agencies and comply with provincial standards. As a result, implementation is often delayed, local priorities and timelines can be overridden and opportunities to engage local contractors, knowledge holders and place-based practices are limited.^{113,114} In doing so, this process often undermines the nimble, responsive and cost-effective qualities that make community-level efforts effective.

We heard recurring examples of this tension in practice throughout our engagement. During the 2024 Parker Lake fire evacuation in Fort Nelson, around 20 per cent of residents chose to remain, including members of Northern Fire WoRx, a trained local fire mitigation and response organization largely staffed by First Nations people.¹¹⁵ Crew members described both the anxiety of staying to protect their community and the fear of potential criminal charges.

¹⁰⁴ Wildfire specialist, interview by BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, October 29, 2025, Vancouver, BC.

¹⁰⁵ Wildfire specialist, interview by BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, November 25, 2025, Ft. Nelson, BC.

¹⁰⁶ Wildfire specialist, interview by BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, October 28, 2025, Vancouver, BC.

¹⁰⁷ Wildfire specialist, interview by BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, October 29, 2025, Vancouver, BC.

¹⁰⁸ Similkameen Elder and knowledge holder, interview by BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, October 29, 2025, Similkameen Valley, BC.

¹⁰⁹ Similkameen natural resource specialists, interview by BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, November 13, 2025, Similkameen Valley, BC.

¹¹⁰ James Whitehead et al., “Understanding the Human Dimensions of Wildfire Risk at a Community Level in British Columbia, Canada,” *Canadian Geographies / Géographies Canadiennes* 70, no. 2 (2026).

¹¹¹ Kelsey Copes-Gerbitz et al., “Cooperative Community Wildfire Response: Pathways to First Nations’ Leadership and Partnership in British Columbia, Canada,” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 114 (2024): 104933.

¹¹² Gary Filmon, *Firestorm 2003: Provincial Review*, (Government of British Columbia, 2004).

¹¹³ Brenna Owen, “Fire Experts Prescribe Indigenous Cultural Burns to Reduce Wildfire Risk in B.C.,” *The Canadian Press*, July 18, 2021.

¹¹⁴ Kelsey Copes-Gerbitz et al., “Community Engagement With Proactive Wildfire Management in British Columbia, Canada: Perceptions, Preferences, and Barriers to Action,” *Frontiers in Forests and Global Change* 5 (March 2022).

¹¹⁵ *The growing issue of wildfires in Canada and the consequential effects that wildfires have on forestry and agriculture industries: Hearing before the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry*, 44th Parliament, 1st session (2024) (statement of Sonja Leverkus, Professor, Ecosystem Scientist and Prescribed Fire Specialist, Shifting Mosaics Corporation and Northern Fire WoRx Corporation, University of Alberta).

Similarly, a fire stewardship leader from a Tsilhqot'in First Nation described how cultural burning was significantly constrained by provincial requirements, including lengthy burn and technical plan approvals, with some stretching over a year and requiring five levels of government authorization.¹¹⁶

In one instance, a BC Wildfire Service investigation was launched after a cultural burn surpassed the planned area on Tsilhqot'in Title land and extended into Crown land. According to a representative of the First Nation that conducted the burn, they had engaged in burn planning, chosen a low-risk time of year, ensured hired specialists were on site and made the Province aware of the burn; however, they had stopped short of seeking authorization because the administrative requirements and associated costs made the practice untenable and inconsistent with their own laws and traditions, which viewed cultural burning as an inherent right of the Tsilhqot'in Nation (a right that is further affirmed by UNDRIP).¹¹⁷ As a result, the First Nation received a letter from the Natural Resource Officer Service warning of fines up to \$500,000 and up to two years' imprisonment for future infractions.¹¹⁸ These penalties are consistent with those provided for under the *Wildfire Act*.¹¹⁹

Participants we spoke with underlined that surveillance and regulatory constraints limit the ability to exercise the right to burn and undermine place-based knowledge and practices that exist outside Crown authority. Examples like this reflect the ongoing tension between provincial government practices and Indigenous practices, despite important progress in this area, and show that work must be done to resolve these differences in approach.

As one fire expert summarized:

... not only were we not doing enough proactively, but we actually didn't have the right people at the table when it came to decision making around fire and ... we had been ignoring Indigenous fire stewardship for 150 years...and that was really significant because it both catalyzed change, but also recognized all of the Indigenous voices who had been saying for the last 150 years, "We have a role to play. We understand fire."'¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Kira M. Hoffman et al., "The Right to Burn: Barriers and Opportunities for Indigenous-Led Fire Stewardship in Canada," *FACETS* 7 (2022): 464–81, <https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0062>.

¹¹⁷ While the area where the fire took place began in proven Tsilhqot'in title land and moved into designated Crown land, it was an area that had been identified as part of a broader area of Tsilhqot'in title by Justice David Vickers in the B.C. Supreme Court's 2007 *Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia* decision.

¹¹⁸ Details of this incident were shared at the 2026 Public Interest Environmental Law Conference and subsequently corroborated through correspondence and documentary evidence reviewed by BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner.

¹¹⁹ *Wildfire Act*, SBC 2004, c 31, ss 5, 43(2).

¹²⁰ BC wildfire specialist, interview by BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, October 29, 2025, Vancouver, BC.

An Elder and fire practitioner from the Similkameen Nation described a related disconnect between technical systems and local knowledge:

“They come with this overkill, with their sciences and they’re putting weather meters in and moisture counts and everything. Why can’t you just feel the grass and ask what it is, you know? Wind machines. Why don’t you ask somebody that lives here, which way the wind is going to predominantly blow? And when [the winds] are going to switch?”

For this Similkameen Elder, fire governance requires respecting and validating a way of knowing that is grounded in an understanding of the land but that is also connected to Indigenous rights to maintain their culture and ways of life. He further describes:

“It’s all about the heart and the touching and the hand, the putting the medicine in your hands and the fire in your hands and say, well, ... we’re asking you to do this for us ... It takes a long time for people to unlearn the colonial traits, domination and everything else, and then realizing that we’re human too. We have a language, we have a culture, we have land, we have all of these things.”¹²¹

The need to recognize Indigenous knowledge and governance authority as “an important part of the equation” has been recommended by numerous government and expert reports.^{122,123,124}

We also heard that Indigenous fire stewardship should be understood not simply as fire management, but as part of broader ecological governance.¹²⁵ Indigenous knowledge holders emphasized the interconnections between fire, water and land, evident in how high-intensity fires contribute to soil depletion, landslides and increased flood risk. The erosion of Indigenous governance — alongside fire suppression, industrial logging and forest management,^{126,127} vegetation clearing and livestock grazing — has produced forests across B.C. that are prone to high-severity fires, increasing vulnerability and human rights impacts.¹²⁸ As a wildfire specialist explained, “when we’re thinking about the impacts of forest management practices on wildfire risk, there are also parallel impacts on ecosystem health, closely connected to community well-being.”¹²⁹

¹²¹ This need to recognize Indigenous knowledge and governance authority was a core recommendation in Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, *From the Ashes: Reimagining Fire Safety and Emergency Management in Indigenous Communities* (Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 2018).

¹²² Amy Cardinal Christianson et al., “Centering Indigenous Voices: The Role of Fire in the Boreal Forest of North America,” *Current Forestry Reports* 8, no. 3 (2022): 257–76;

¹²³ Kira M. Hoffman et al., “The Right to Burn.”

¹²⁴ George Abbott and Maureen Chapman, *Addressing the New Normal: 21st Century Disaster Management in British Columbia* (BC Flood and Wildfire Review, 2018).

¹²⁵ William Nikolakis et al., “A Tale of Two Fire Systems: Indigenous Fire Stewardship in British Columbia and California,” *Fire Ecology* 21, no. 1 (2025): 58, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42408-025-00399-8>.

¹²⁶ Kira M. Hoffman et al., “The Right to Burn.”

¹²⁷ James Whitehead et al., “Understanding the Human Dimensions.”

¹²⁸ Taylor, “Wildfires,” 6.

¹²⁹ Wildfire specialist, interview by BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, October 28, 2025, Vancouver, BC.

Admittedly, the practical challenges of the B.C. government sharing regulatory control and management authority with First Nations — and local rural communities more broadly — are complex. However, we commonly heard how meaningful this shared jurisdiction is in mitigating wildfire impacts, as well as a shared hope that positive momentum will continue. Respecting Indigenous knowledge about wildfire management not only contributes to addressing systemic racism against Indigenous Peoples, but it also makes all of us safer, protecting our rights to life, security and the highest attainable standard of health.

Conclusion

This report has shown that the threats posed by wildfires to the rights to life, security and health are not experienced equally. They are influenced by pre-existing inequalities; shaped by geography, income, age, disability, Indigeneity and whether one lives in a remote or rural community; and intensified by existing infrastructure, service and governance arrangements.

Two principles of a human rights-based analysis — empowerment and participation — raise considerations of how decision-making can meaningfully include the knowledge, efforts and lived experience of the people and communities most directly affected. Working from the understanding that we must coexist with wildfires, a human rights lens shifts attention toward how governance can better protect rights, reduce inequities and support the capacities of those most impacted. Governance should also draw on the deep expertise of Indigenous and local communities to reduce negative impacts from wildfires.

The purpose of this report has been to open a conversation about the relationship between human rights and wildfires. The dynamics described in this report demonstrate that wildfires are a human rights issue that is here to stay, shaped by structural conditions that distribute risk and vulnerability in uneven ways. While both the challenges and solutions are complex, a human rights approach — taken to ensure a better future — requires us to address inequalities at every stage, from preventative forest stewardship practices to emergency response.

While mixed-severity wildfires will always be a natural feature of many ecosystems, a human rights lens highlights that wildfire risk and impacts are shaped by a combination of ecological, social and historical factors. Climate change and land management decisions influence wildfire behaviour, while inequality, discrimination and colonialism shape who is most exposed, who is most affected and who has the greatest capacity to prepare for, respond to and recover from wildfire.



British Columbia's
**Office of the Human Rights
Commissioner**

536 – 999 Canada Place
Vancouver, BC V6C 3E1
1-844-922-6472 | info@bchumanrights.ca

 bchumanrights.ca

  [@humanrights4bc](https://www.instagram.com/humanrights4bc)

 [humanrights4bc](https://www.facebook.com/humanrights4bc)