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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Commissioner lays out human rights implications of wildfire response in new report

Vancouver B.C. – In the wake of a summer rife with evacuation orders, smoky skies and heat warnings, B.C.'s Human Rights Commissioner has issued a report calling out the disproportionate impacts of wildfires on—and lack of supports for—vulnerable groups.

These include seniors, children, pregnant people, Indigenous people and people with disabilities, particularly those in rural communities or on-reserve and those experiencing poverty.

Per the report, [Through the Haze: A Human Rights Perspective on Wildfires in British Columbia](#), those on Indigenous reserves are more than four times as likely to directly encounter wildfires than non-reserve communities. The report also highlights that:

- children, older adults 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 needs
- wildfires disrupt Indigenous Peoples' land-based practices and threaten cultural continuity

"While wildfires impact us all, it is important to recognize that there are people and communities that are more exposed, less able to protect themselves and slower to recover," said Commissioner Kasari Govender. "As the threat of wildfire increases, these unequal impacts become more pronounced. Decision-makers must ensure preparedness and mitigation strategies do not leave those most vulnerable behind."

The Commissioner's report comes as wildfires continue to become larger, more severe and more disruptive. In B.C., 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.

The report notes that while human-caused climate change (among other factors) has contributed to this intensification, legal and bureaucratic suppression of Indigenous fire stewardship has also been a notable factor. It states that the erosion of Indigenous governance—alongside industrial logging, vegetation clearing and expansion of human settlements—has produced forests across B.C. that are more prone to high-severity fires.

"While the Province has taken some key steps toward learning best practices from Indigenous and community-based fire stewardship approaches, more is needed," said Commissioner Govender. "Learning from those who have cared for this land for countless generations, and from people whose communities are directly affected, isn't just good human rights practice; it's part of the practical solution to addressing the smoke, fire and destruction that impacts us all."

“Mixed severity wildfires will always be a natural feature of many ecosystems, and something we need to co-exist with,” Govender added. “What decision-makers can control, however, is how they respond—and whether they meaningfully account for the ways that marginalized people are disproportionately made vulnerable to displacement and disruption of community, supports and livelihoods.”

Learn more

This report is the first in a series of “extended spotlights” on key issues facing people in British Columbia, following from the Commissioner’s 2024 report, [Rights in Focus: Lived Realities in B.C.](#), which provides a snapshot of the state of human rights in the province. More extended spotlights will be available in the coming months, and the next triennial Rights in Focus report is slated for release in 2027.

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Media contact

To request an interview with Commissioner Kasari Govender, please contact media@bchumanrights.ca or 604-306-7369.

Media kit

[Visit our media kit](#) for images of Commissioner Kasari Govender, pronunciation guidance, bios and more.

About BCOHRC

BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner exists to address the root causes of inequality, discrimination and injustice in B.C. by shifting laws, policies, practices and cultures. We do this work through education, research, advocacy, inquiry and monitoring. Learn more at: bchumanrights.ca

About the Commissioner

Kasari Govender, KC, began her work as B.C.’s first independent human rights commissioner in September 2019. As an independent officer of the Legislature, Commissioner Govender is uniquely positioned to ensure human rights in B.C. are protected, respected and advanced on a systemic level. Her work through BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner has included community-embedded research about a range of human rights issues and public inquiries into experiences of hate in the pandemic and detentions under the *Adult Guardianship Act*, use of media exclusion zones, and systemic discrimination in policing. It has also included public awareness campaigns about ableism, racism and misinformation, and guidance to government that, among other things, informed the creation of the *Anti-Racism Data Act* and the *Anti-Racism Act*. Commissioner Govender was reappointed for a second term beginning in September 2024.

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