Media safety at the scene of a wildfire

KAMLOOPS – The British Columbia government is committed to keeping the public informed about wildfire activity in the province.

When a fire spreads quickly and threatens a community, it is important that the public has access to current information about the fire and what steps the BC Wildfire Service is taking in response.

The news media play an essential role in keeping the public informed and safe, but it is important to keep the media safe too. Under the Workers Compensation Act, the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development is responsible for the safety of all individuals who visit a wildfire work site. Members of the media wanting to arrange a visit to the scene of a wildfire should be aware that they will be subject to site safety rules.

Note: Given the unpredictable nature of wildfires and wildfire behaviour, the final decision on providing access to a wildfire rests with the wildfire’s incident commander, and initial permission to visit a wildfire may be revoked in the interest of safety. If a media representative enters a wildfire site without permission, it not only jeopardizes that person’s safety, but also the safety of firefighting crews. Such conduct may even force a halt to fire response operations (including air support) until that person is removed from the site.

Please respect the BC Wildfire Service’s decisions regarding access to a wildfire, since entering the fire site without permission can directly affect firefighters' ability to contain a fire.

For media wanting to visit a wildfire work site, please notify the BC Wildfire Service’s local fire information officer. Media will be provided with details about the fire, safety restrictions and site access protocols. This information may be provided at the site or by telephone. The BC Wildfire Service understands the media’s need for quick access to a fire site and will strive to provide this access in a safe and efficient manner.

Provincial Wildfire Coordination Centre: 250 312-3051

Coastal Fire Centre: 250 951-4209

Cariboo Fire Centre: 778 799-2100

Prince George Fire Centre: 250 561-4629

Kamloops Fire Centre: 250 554-5965

Southeast Fire Centre: 250 365-4014
Northwest Fire Centre: 250 847-6639

A list of fire information officers and their contact information is also available on the BC Wildfire Service website: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/wildfire-status/contact-channels/media-information

1. **In order to be escorted around a fire site, members of the media must wear appropriate clothing.** This includes a hard hat and clothing that fully covers the arms and legs. Avoid highly flammable synthetic fabrics, such as nylon and polyester. Tightly woven clothes made from natural fibres are recommended. A high-visibility vest and eye protection may be required. Footwear suitable for rough terrain is essential.

2. **A BC Wildfire Service representative will be assigned to the media representative and safety rules will be discussed.** Stay with this designated representative at all times at the worksite. Follow his or her instructions.

3. **On the fireline, the media representative must designate a supervisor from the media organization to brief the workers on safety regulations and ensure that they comply with these rules.**

To ensure media compliance with health and safety regulations, the BC Wildfire Service requires them to adhere to the rules listed below:

**General**

- The media outlet's appointed supervisor has the authority and responsibility to correct any unsafe activity.
- The incident commander has the authority to restrict or limit access to a site.
- A BC Wildfire Service representative will provide relevant safety information and will communicate and review site hazards for media staff at the fire site.
- If this representative’s instructions are disregarded, the incident commander may require the violator(s) to leave the site.
- Continual safety violators may be reported to WorkSafeBC or Labour Canada for further followup.

**Aircraft operations**

- All wildfires automatically have “restricted airspace” applied to them. This is usually defined as an area with a radius of five nautical miles around the fire, but it can be altered. It should not be assumed that it is clear to enter the airspace outside of this area. It is illegal to enter restricted airspace without prior approval from the BC Wildfire Service’s regional wildfire coordination officer (RWCO).
- If a media outlet wants to request air access to a restricted area, it must contact a fire information officer. The request will be forwarded to the RWCO. Access may be granted if conditions are appropriate and it is safe to do so. If there is a Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) in place for the wildfire, the pilot must check the NOTAM for any other specific restrictions.
- The operation of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs, or “drones”) near an active wildfire is illegal and extremely dangerous, especially when low-flying firefighting aircraft are present. Transport Canada and the BC Wildfire Service explicitly prohibit the use of
drones of any size near a wildfire. Violating these rules can jeopardize the lives of aircrews and those on the ground, and inhibit fire suppression activities. For safety reasons, if a drone is detected in the restricted airspace over a wildfire, the BC Wildfire Service will ground any of its aircraft that are nearby until the drone has left the area.


**Stay alert**

- Know the escape routes. **Ask** if unsure or if there are any other concerns.
- Watch out for rolling debris that may be dislodged by fire suppression activity.
- Stay away from windfalls, weakened trees, loose rocks and hot spots.
- Ride only in standard vehicles, not heavy machinery. Always wear a seatbelt.
- Use caution around machinery and only approach when in full view of the operator.
- Stay at least two tree lengths away from tree-falling activities.
- A safety briefing will be provided before entering a helicopter.
- When boarding or exiting a helicopter, follow the pilot’s instructions.
- Stay clear of airtanker drop areas and helicopter landing areas.
- Have plenty of water on hand to prevent dehydration.
- Any injury **must** be reported and treated.

For any questions about safety responsibilities as an employer, media outlets can contact the following organizations:

**For print media outlets:**

WorkSafeBC - Prevention Division
604 276-3100 in the Lower Mainland
1 888 621-7233 toll-free within B.C.
www.worksafebc.com

**For radio and television media outlets:**

Labour Program
1 800 641-4049

Thank you for reviewing these site safety rules. The BC Wildfire Service is dedicated to safeguarding all personnel within a fire site. Efforts by media outlets to help ensure safe work site practices are appreciated.

**Contact:**

Kevin Skrepnek
Chief Fire Information Officer
Provincial Wildfire Coordination Centre
BC Wildfire Service
250 312-3051

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Connect with the Province of B.C. at: news.gov.bc.ca/connect