


UNDERSTANDING THE SPARK

HOW WILDFIRES START, WHY THEY'RE GROWING, AND WHAT WE CAN DO



BCMF
Conservation

An aerial photograph of a wildfire. Thick, billowing white and grey smoke rises from a forest of trees with autumn-colored foliage. On the right side, bright orange and yellow flames are visible, consuming the vegetation. The smoke fills much of the upper half of the frame, creating a hazy atmosphere.

In British Columbia, wildfire seasons are no longer rare disasters — they are an expected part of every summer, growing worse each year. In 2023 alone, BC witnessed its most devastating wildfire season on record, with over 2.84 million hectares burned — an area larger than the entire country of Slovenia. Some fires grew so large and intense that they generated their own weather systems, creating firestorms.

2024 shattered all heat records, becoming the hottest year in recorded history — and the impacts are undeniable. Longer droughts, earlier snow melts, and wildfire seasons stretching for months. What was once a natural force of renewal has become a relentless cycle of destruction: climate change is driving wildfires, and every fire is driving the climate crisis even faster.



In 2023, every region of British Columbia faced record-breaking wildfire conditions, with extreme fire behavior and widespread impacts on both communities and ecosystems. A total of 2,245 wildfires were recorded across the province.

Wildfires: A Natural Force — Now Out of Balance

In the right conditions, fire renews the land. Indigenous communities have long recognized this, practicing cultural burning for generations to promote healthy forests and grasslands. When managed naturally or through stewardship, wildfires help maintain the rich biodiversity that defines BC's wild spaces.

WILDFIRES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A NATURAL AND NECESSARY PART OF BRITISH COLUMBIA'S LANDSCAPES. FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, FIRES HAVE SHAPED ECOSYSTEMS BY CLEARING DEAD AND DISEASED TREES, RETURNING NUTRIENTS TO THE SOIL, AND CREATING NEW HABITATS FOR A WIDE RANGE OF PLANTS AND ANIMALS.

However, the relationship between fire and the environment is changing — and rapidly. Climate change, fueled by human activities is tipping the balance. Warmer temperatures, drier soils, and shifting weather patterns are creating conditions where fires ignite more easily, spread faster, and burn with greater intensity.

In British Columbia, the wildfire season now begins earlier than it did a few decades ago and lasts longer into the fall. Extreme fire behavior, such as “firestorms” that generate their own weather, is becoming more common.

In 2023, BC experienced its worst wildfire season on record, with more than 2.84 million hectares burned.

As the climate continues to warm, we are not just seeing more wildfires — we are witnessing fires that cause lasting damage to

forests, wildlife, water sources, and the very ecosystems that once relied on occasional fire for renewal. Protecting the environment today means understanding that wildfires are no longer operating under “natural” conditions — and that conservation efforts must adapt to meet this new reality.

Recognizing the connection between climate change, wildfires, and conservation is essential if we hope to protect BC's incredible natural heritage for future generations.

Understanding the Spark

Wildfires can ignite from many sources — both natural and human-caused. In British Columbia's ecosystems, fire has always been a part of the natural cycle. However, today's fire patterns are increasingly influenced by human activities and a warming climate, making wildfires more frequent, larger, and harder to predict.

NATURAL CAUSES

Lightning strikes are a common natural ignition source for wildfires in BC. During summer thunderstorms, dry lightning — lightning without significant rain — can strike dry vegetation and start fires that smolder for days before flaring up. Natural fires, in the right balance, can help maintain healthy forests by clearing dead material and encouraging new growth.

HUMAN-CAUSED FIRES

Unfortunately, a large percentage of wildfires are now started by human activities. These include:

- Unattended campfires
- Discarded cigarettes
- Industrial activities like logging and mining
- Vehicle sparks from off-road use
- Burning debris during backyard fires

Human-caused fires tend to occur closer to communities, putting homes, infrastructure, and lives at greater risk.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change is not always the direct spark, but it creates the perfect conditions for fire:

- Hotter temperatures dry out forests and grasslands
- Extended droughts leave vegetation brittle and highly flammable
- Earlier snowmelts and longer summers lengthen the fire season
- More intense storms increase the chance of lightning strikes

These changes mean that even small ignitions — whether from a lightning bolt or a careless human act — are far more likely to grow into large, destructive wildfires. In a warmer, drier world, the environment itself becomes more flammable.

Understanding how wildfires start, and how climate change is fueling them, is crucial to protecting BC's landscapes, wildlife, and communities.

Preparing for Wildfire Season in British Columbia

As wildfires become more frequent and severe across BC, preparation is more important than ever. Whether you live in a forested area or just travel through wildfire-prone regions, taking action ahead of time can help protect your home, your family, and your community.

1. Create a defensible space around your home

- Clear leaves, pine needles, and debris from roofs, gutters, decks, and yards.
- Keep firewood, propane tanks, and other flammable materials at least 10 metres away from your home.
- Trim trees and shrubs so they're spaced apart and not touching your house or each other.

2. Make an emergency plan

- Have a family evacuation plan — know your exit routes, meeting spots, and how to communicate if cell service is down.
- Pack a grab-and-go emergency kit with essentials like water, food, medications, ID, and copies of important documents.
- Know the locations of nearby emergency shelters and sign up for local emergency alerts.

3. Stay informed

- Follow updates from BC Wildfire Service, your local municipality, and Emergency Management BC.
- Download apps or check online maps for real-time wildfire activity and air quality levels.
- Be aware of fire bans, high-risk zones, and evacuation alerts in your area.

4. Prepare your property

- Install spark arrestors on chimneys and stovepipes.
- Use fire-resistant building materials if you're renovating or building.
- Label your home with visible address signage so emergency crews can find you easily.
- Install a WASP Wildfire Protection kit.

5. Be a good steward

- Follow all fire bans and restrictions — even a single spark from a campfire or ATV can cause disaster.
- Talk to your neighbours about preparedness. A strong community is a safer community.
- Support local conservation and fire resiliency efforts — healthy forests burn less destructively.

MÉTIS IN BC

Métis in BC emerged as part of a vast and extensive kinship network of thriving mixed-ancestry communities throughout the Pacific Northwest. Both the product of eastern Métis migration to the West and independent ethnogenesis within the region that now encompasses northern California, Oregon, Washington State, Idaho, Western Montana, and British Columbia, Métis self-determination flourished alongside the relationships established between First Nations and fur trading companies. Today BCMF is committed to recognizing and reconstituting these important Indigenous kinship networks and to restoring the self-determination of all Métis peoples through community based research.

MICHIF LANGUAGE

Michif languages were created by the Métis, a distinct Indigenous people in Canada with a unique mixed heritage, descended from First Nations peoples and European settlers, especially French and Scottish fur traders. Often called the “Children of the Fur Trade,” the Métis emerged through intermarriage and cultural exchange during the fur trade era. Michif is a contact language combining elements of Plains Cree, Ojibwe, and Algonquian languages with Michif French, and also includes influences from Saulteaux, English, and Gaelic. Typically classified as a mixed language, most verbs come from Indigenous sources and most nouns from French. Métis people have long been multilingual, often speaking several languages such as French, English, Cree, and Celtic — a skill that positioned them as vital guides and interpreters between First Nations and European traders.

The BC Métis Federation (BCMF) is a dedicated non-profit organization working in partnership with Métis communities across the province to support the well-being of its members. Rooted in grassroots advocacy, BCMF proudly represents Métis voices from every corner of British Columbia. At the heart of its mission is a commitment to preserving and celebrating Métis heritage — not just for today, but for generations to come. By revitalizing culture, gathering as a community, and passing down stories, BCMF ensures that the spirit, strength, and identity of the Métis people continue to thrive.



Scan to learn more about the conservation work happening across BC. Additional links provide information about the BC Métis Federation, Métis culture, language, and the vibrant communities they represent.



BC Métis
FEDERATION