

September 18, 2020

Fire!

As forest fires rage in the Western US States, winds have brought smoke into BC causing some of the worst air quality, and thus threat to health, anywhere on the planet.

Even though our communities are affected by poor air quality as a result, we look to the south with empathy and feel fortunate that we are not experiencing wildfires. Similarly, we can look to the devastation that fires have caused in Australia with some detachment because it is half a world away from us.

So far this year, we have been fortunate, as a relatively wet and cool summer has resulted in few fires and good numbers of firefighters to tackle the ones that have occurred. But we will have hard wildfire years again. Remember:

- in 2009 fires directly threatened the community of Seton Portage and residents elsewhere in the northern SLRD,
- in 2015 the Boulder Complex fire burned in the Elaho Valley for much of the summer,
- 2017 and 2018 were devastating years for wildfires across the whole province and;
- in 2018, 2019 and already in 2020 we have had communities in the SLRD under evacuation alert and order for wildfires.

While forest management practices play a part in wildfire risk reduction, scientists agree that climate change is driving the increase in the number and severity of wildfires. There is no time for delay or complacency because fires are 'somewhere else'. As the Upper Squamish Valley community can testify after interface fires two years in a row, there is no time when the fire arrives – the time to prepare and reduce the risk to our homes and loved ones is now.

Long term and short term we have the power to act on climate change. Long term, it is about taking aggressive action to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases (GHGs) we produce. You might feel that you live in a place that represents a tiny percentage of the world's population and so anything that you do is insignificant but people across Canada and the world are taking individual action for positive change, in ever increasing numbers. Just as every drop of water builds an ocean, together we can act to become part of the solution. Reducing our carbon footprint and adapting to climate change is the only way to preserve our quality of life.

In the short term, we can take disaster risk reduction action right where we live, especially when it comes to the risk of a wildland interface fire destroying our homes.

I have written previously about the Province's FireSmart program. Now is the time to evaluate and to establish plans for implementing a program. What does FireSmart involve? Some of it is relatively cosmetic like cleaning dead leaves and dry twigs from your gutters, and clearing dead wood from around your buildings.

Then, we need to be prepared to go further. That coniferous tree that is leaning its branches over your roof? It might need a serious trim or even need to be removed. The cedar hedge that could turn your property into a ring of fire might well need to be replaced with something less

flammable. Renovating or building a new house? Think FireSmart materials rather than cedar shakes – there are many beautiful and stylish alternatives. FireSmart does not mean denuding the landscape of trees. It can mean thinning trimming, taking off low branches, removing only trees that would create a wick for a fire right to your doorstep or types of trees that are particularly combustible.

Terrible fires will happen again in BC and in the SLRD. Don't let one take your home.

Take action.

For information on Fire Smart:

- firesmartbc.ca for all kinds of resources, tutorials and testimonial videos
- call us at the SLRD: 604 894 6371

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Rainbow". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Tony Rainbow

Chair, Squamish-Lillooet Regional District