



# Wood Buffalo Wildfire

**In the spring of 2016, the wildfire hazard conditions in and around the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo and Fort McMurray reached unprecedented levels, representing the single, largest contributing factor to what would become one of the worst wildland-urban interface fires in Canadian history. The May 2016 Wood Buffalo Wildfire was first spotted on the afternoon of May 1, at approximately two hectares in size and seven kilometres outside of Fort McMurray.**

By May 3, the Wildfire had grown in size and high winds drove the fire into the community. As a result, almost 88,000 people were evacuated from the Region in a very short period of time. Over the course of five weeks, the Wildfire impacted 589,000 hectares of land in and around the Region and 1,958 structures were lost or damaged. The Insurance Bureau of Canada estimates the Wildfire to be the costliest insured natural disaster in Canadian history. The total financial and economic impact is currently estimated at almost \$8.9 billion.

Whenever a system is tested against extreme conditions, an opportunity exists to capture what worked well and what could be improved for future events. To continuously enhance Alberta's public safety system, the Alberta Emergency Management Agency (AEMA) and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) each conducted independent post-incident assessments to analyze actions taken during response to the wildfire, community stabilization and regional recovery.

Through separate competitive processes, both assessments were awarded to KPMG. The KPMG teams were tasked with producing objective reviews of the Government of Alberta and RMWB's response to the Wildfire, preparedness prior to the 2016 wildfire season, and support for the stabilization and recovery of Wood Buffalo's affected communities. It was a monumental task that demanded a multi-disciplinary approach and due consideration for the thousands of lives impacted by this devastating event. To tell the full story, KPMG engaged thousands of Wood Buffalo residents and affected First Nations communities to share their experiences through interviews, focus groups, and online sessions. We also captured experiences and insights from the many first responders, municipal staff, municipal and provincial leadership, agencies and relief organizations that provided support throughout the Wildfire.

The *Wood Buffalo Wildfire Post Incident Assessment Report*, released in the spring of 2017, presented an impartial and all-encompassing review of the Province's response to the Wildfire using KPMG's formal evaluation framework (emergency prevention, preparedness, response, stabilization, and recovery). This report included 14 recommendations intended to improve both provincial and municipal emergency management programs, including community evacuations. In the summer of 2017 the RMWB released the *Lessons Learned and Recommendations from the 2016 Horse River Wildfire* report, which included key recommendations to improve wildfire response capacity and coordination, and inter-governmental cooperation around community re-entry and recovery.

Perhaps one of the most critical components of these reports remains the focus on fostering community resilience following a natural disaster of this magnitude. The Region and the Province worked together to mitigate the impacts to families and the community, property, livelihoods and the economy. The KPMG team brought professional experience in mental health and social consulting services in order to recommend enhancements to emergency social support processes, health and environmental safety measures, and community resources needed to facilitate social and economic recovery.

"I can confirm how important this document is, not merely to Wood Buffalo, but perhaps far beyond," said Wood Buffalo Mayor Melissa Blake of the *Lessons Learned* report. Both wildfire post-incident assessment reports have become indispensable resources to all levels of government, communities and agencies in Canada and abroad in assessing existing emergency management programs, and in preparing for upcoming wildfire seasons.

**We are on your side all the way.**

