

Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry (AGFO)
Examine and report on the growing issue of wildfires in Canada and the consequential effects that wildfires have on forestry and agriculture industries, as well as rural and Indigenous communities, throughout the country
August 20, 2024

Organization Mandate

The David McAntony Gibson Foundation, which operates as GlobalMedic, is a registered Canadian charity that has provided life-saving disaster relief and humanitarian aid since 2002. GlobalMedic is committed to delivering the right aid to the right people at the right time. Founded by a first responder, staffed by professional humanitarians, and backed by a team of emergency workers and skilled volunteers, GlobalMedic has been able to respond to 258 disasters in 84 countries including Canada. The organization has provided emergency support such as food, water purification/hygiene, shelter, and medical services to over 5.2 million people in need.

GlobalMedic's Wildfire Programming

The 2023 wildfire season was the worst in Canadian history. Over 6,500 wildfires were reported across the country, burning over 18 million hectares of land, and overtaking the country's previous record of 7.6 million hectares by a large margin.

British Columbia and Alberta were particularly affected by the 2023 wildfire season. British Columbia saw the most fires with 2,245 wildfires reported, followed by Alberta with 1,088 wildfires. British Columbia had an area of 2.84 million hectares burned and Alberta had 2.2 million. This prompted the declaration of a Provincial State of Emergency in both British Columbia and Alberta. The Northwest Territories also experienced a very difficult wildfire season with 299 wildfires and over 4 million hectares burned. A Territorial State of Emergency was declared for the Northwest Territories, leading to 70% of the territory's population being evacuated to neighbouring provinces.

Indigenous communities in particular sustained serious damages as they are often located in rural, remote locations. They also tend to have elderly populations, which poses unique challenges for firefighting and evacuations.

Fire departments struggled during the 2023 wildfire season to contain the flames. Many of the fire departments in wildfire prone regions are volunteer services that have limited operational capacity to effectively fight the fires. Additional resources are needed to assist fire departments in their response as there is a chronic shortage of firefighting apparatus and equipment. There are many variables that contribute to the severity of wildfires, making it difficult to predict what a wildfire season will look like. The 2024 wildfire season began early with Alberta declaring the season underway 10 days before the traditional March 1 start. The risk across Canada remains high and is predicted to stay elevated for the coming months. Ensuring that rural and volunteer fire departments have the equipment needed to effectively respond to wildfires, is a critical step in maintaining control of Canada's wildfire season.



The funding made available by the Federal Government to not-for-profit organizations to support wildfire relief efforts was limited to The Fighting and Managing Wildfires in a Changing Climate Program: Training Fund, which was focused on training new community-based firefighters. Personnel can be requested and reassigned from other areas of the province or country, and additional support can be brought in on the administrative and coordination side of the response. All those options will have a restricted level of impact, however, if there is not a corresponding availability of firefighting equipment to be utilized. In addition to the Training Fund, the Federal government has also created the Fighting and Managing Wildfires in a Changing Climate Program: Equipment Fund. Eligible recipients of this fund, however, are limited to provincial and territorial governments.

It is difficult for fire departments to move through the equipment acquisition process. There are many lengthy procedures they need to go through and ultimately their decisions go back to typically a municipality who is balancing many priorities. It can be years between a request for additional equipment and when the department actually receives it. Equipment like new full fire trucks take time to order and produce. With wildfire season escalating the way it has been the past two years, these anticipated delays pose risks to the responding capacity of rural and volunteer fire departments.

Additionally, many of these rural fire departments are responsible for protecting off-road, hard to reach areas which full fire trucks are unable to access. Having equipment that is adaptable to these conditions is important to ensure these fire departments are able to respond to all types and locations of wildfires occurring in their communities.

GlobalMedic is working with rural and volunteer fire departments to coordinate the timely delivery of fire skids to bolster their available resources. By making additional equipment available to these smaller departments, we can help them increase their capacity to respond to wildfires in not only their coverage areas but those of neighbouring departments as well. Provision of more equipment like fire skids means departments can be proactive about their response planning and adaptive as the season progresses. All of this ultimately helps to minimize the damage caused by wildfires and the resulting impact it can have on communities in Canada.

Each of these fire skids gives the ability for a department to turn a pick-up truck or utility vehicle into a small fire truck. Each skid is equipped with a 1,000-litre holding tank which can be filled with water. The units also have a pump, and hoses attached. The pump is able to pressurize the water to create the high-pressure water stream required for fighting fires. These units are self-contained and include all the components required meaning that the departments can hit the ground running and get them operational immediately. These units can be moved into areas that might be inaccessible to full sized fire trucks, stopping the progression of a fire before it moves to a less remote area.

The units are portable. They are added to the back of pickup trucks during fire season effectively turning that pickup truck into a fire truck. This adds additional capacity in terms of equipment. During off season, the units can be cleaned up and stored and then redeployed. Proper maintenance will ensure the units last for several years giving a longer-term solution to assist these fire departments.



GlobalMedic has been working with a company in Edmonton to produce these units. Each unit has been newly made for the receiving fire department meaning everything is functioning properly and with proper storage and maintenance the units will last for years. This program has allowed for the creation of additional jobs in Edmonton. This job creation has meant that our manufacturing partner has been able to hire Ukrainian refugees to build the skids, creating a massive benefit for these households.

Another reason that this program is effective lies in the fact that it is providing a solution that fire departments want. Many fire departments want brush trucks or units like this. If their chiefs ask council for the budget to acquire them, the process can take up to two years and they will be expected to cut another line item from the budget. Since we are buying in bulk, our price point per unit is less than half what municipalities would pay. This program delivers the right aid that is needed in a timely manner and provides an incredible value for money. We have distributed more than 100 of these units since 2023 and continue to receive requests for support on a weekly basis.

Program Feedback

“This 1000L tank, pump and equipment unit will help our fire department greatly by allowing us to quickly act on spot fires, lighting strike fires and any other smaller type of fire that would jeopardize the safety of the citizens and for us to facilitate structural protection in our area. The Village Chase is a small community on the Western shore of Little Shuswap Lake in British Columbia. Without support from companies like yours, we would find it hard to operate and protect lives and infrastructure in our community and the ones around us.” – Chase Fire Rescue

“Adams Lake Fire Department consists of twenty paid on call personnel, all of which were very excited to see this skid and to start training. With the challenging terrain surrounding Adams Lake, this firefighting skid placed on the back of our one-ton vehicle will go places that our Engines could not. This skid will not only help in a faster response time, but it will also show our community that we are gathering the necessary equipment to respond to such calls. Our front- and second-line Engines have been relied on to go in areas that they have not been designed for. Now we can rely on a four-wheel drive truck with a firefighter skid to go into these hard areas. This not only saves valuable time, but also saves undue wear and tear on our Engines as well as possible lives. It is through generous donations like this that keep communities safe, keep the morale in the Fire Department high and take a big step to life safety.” – Jeff Avery, Fire Chief and Steven Teed, Director of Community Safety

“This unit will prove to be very useful in the upcoming season, and seasons to come, protecting the citizens of Westlock County and the Village of Clyde knowing we have the tools to protect them. While we have larger apparatus for fire suppression, the smaller Brush units play a vital role in getting off-road quickly, where we need them. This will greatly reduce the physical demands of our firefighters pulling great lengths of hose into fields and bushes from the roadway.” – James Hoetmen, Fire Chief

“The device you have provided us with will add to our ability to continue providing fire protection to our community. Our fire department does not receive the necessary funds from the government, and we truly appreciate what you have done for us.” – Wyatt Arcand, Fire Chief, Alexander First Nation

Gaps in the Canadian Government's Response

The current funding mechanisms made available by the federal government are disjointed, clumsy and miss the mark. They need to be streamlined and improved. For example, there is a program that charities, municipalities, and not for profits can apply for to train fire fighters but not equip them. There is another fund that equips fire departments but only Provinces and Municipalities can apply. That leaves an incredible disconnect between the programs and it excludes charities like ours from receiving funding to provide equipment.

The other grant programs for municipalities and provinces makes it impossible to achieve economies of scale and lower costs. The fire department that wants a fire skid has to buy one unit and will pay triple the costs of what we are paying using our supply side management approach. It would be better to create a central depot of equipment to provide. Equipment can include fire skids, hose, gloves, boots, helmets, bunker gear. A central program would be faster in providing equipment and lower costs so more equipment can be provided.

The government's response to disasters by creating a matching fund is a flawed policy with catastrophic consequences. The Government of Canada currently has a policy of matching funds raised by humanitarian charities. The idea is to encourage Canadians to give by doubling their impact. Historically the policy matched the funds raised by all responding agencies and created a pool of those funds which the government then programmed. A few years ago, the government changed course and started appointing select charities to be the matched partners. Thus far, only 3 entities have been given the matched funding: the Red Cross, UNICEF and the Humanitarian Coalition. There are 86,000 registered charities in Canada and the government has created a monopoly to benefit only a few of them. In other words, only 0.0034% of charities registered in Canada receive matched funding when responding to a disaster.

Members of the Humanitarian Coalition contribute annually so that the coalition can operate. The members tend to be larger agencies, and the current requirements set the bar at 10 million. It is hard to imagine our government would allow a program to exist whereby a charity would have to pay to join a group in order to access government funds. Pay-for-access programs are not appropriate.

Matching funds given to only specific entities comes at the expense of the other charities in the sector. We know this because when disaster strikes, like in the case of the 2023 Canadian wildfire season and resulting evacuations or most recently the Jasper wildfires and evacuations, we often receive calls and emails from potential donors that ultimately choose to not donate to us when they hear that the funds will not be matched by the government. These are individuals who have previously donated to our organization and because of this policy we lose their support.

The policy hurts the broader sector who is responding and trying to help and thereby hurts the people who have been affected by the disaster. By incentivizing Canadians to give to only select charities, such as those in the Humanitarian Coalition, the government hinders the ability of other agencies to help people in their desperate moment of need. If you kept the old policy, dozens of humanitarian agencies would be working to rally their donors and create a larger movement to help. The success of a humanitarian mission depends on the on-the-ground access of the agency, and having more agencies actively responding increases the benefit that people experiencing an emergency situation, like a wildfire evacuation, would receive.

Since 2017, over 200 million dollars have been programmed through this version of a matching fund. This has created an unfair monopoly in the charitable sector, one that hurts other agencies especially smaller agencies. The government's role is not to create a monopoly. One could never imagine a day when the government would offer to pay for a free companion flight for someone who bought a ticket on Air Canada but not on WestJet or provide a free matching phone to a person who bought a phone from Bell but not Rogers. Governments should be leveling the playing field not hurting smaller charities.

Summary of Recommendations

- Ensuring that rural and volunteer fire departments have the equipment needed to effectively respond to wildfires is a critical step in maintaining control of Canada's wildfire season.
- Additional resources are needed to assist rural and volunteer fire departments in their response as there is a chronic shortage of firefighting apparatus and equipment.
- Having equipment that is adaptable to various conditions is important to ensure rural and volunteer fire departments are able to respond to all types and locations of wildfires occurring in their communities.
- Create a program to provide supply side solutions or a central depot of equipment.
- Removing the matching fund in its current format and replacing it with a more fair approach that actually helps Canadians in their time of need.