

Wildfire preparedness efforts in Ontario, Canada are a hot topic.

People across the province of Ontario are increasingly experiencing wildfire in their lives; smoky skies and fire related news headlines are becoming the norm, as more and more communities find the threat of wildfire at their doorstep.

Climate change is causing wildfires that are more intense and occur more often. The 2023 season was Canada's worst on record, and 2025 the second worst. As more fires occur, burning hotter and larger areas, 'business as usual' is not an option. People need to be more prepared, but there are many challenges.

A fear of fire and its consequences has led to wildfire management approaches focused primarily on suppression - putting fires out before they cause destruction. Yet fire is a natural and essential part of ecosystems in Ontario. A wildfire can give areas of forest a fresh start and allow new life to begin. For millennia Indigenous Peoples have understood and worked with it. Nonetheless fire can also harm people and the things they value.

This thesis helps to understand how current wildfire preparedness efforts fall short. The purpose is to provide an overview of challenges to wildfire preparedness captured through interviews with professionals who work with wildfire in various roles. Overall, it was found that the people of Ontario need a better understanding of fire and how to live with it. The province must move beyond reactivity to focus on how wildfire can be incorporated into everyday lives to be more prepared for the before, during, and after stages of a wildfire.

Findings were analysed at three levels; challenges for individual households, for wildfire management agencies, and for communities. Across these different levels many challenges were identified. Factors impacting household level action included the monetary costs required to make a house more fire resistant, as well as the tendency to only prioritize risks after a disaster event has happened. For agencies, balancing the need to be able to respond to wildfires, while also moving beyond a fixation on suppression was a challenge compounded by struggles to recruit and retain staff. Communities need better preparedness plans that fit their context and needs, and Indigenous communities lack support to facilitate culturally appropriate evacuation.

In the process of identifying challenges, avenues forward also came to light. Awareness campaigns, education, and incentives can support households in making better preparedness decisions. Agencies could benefit from broadening recruitment efforts and fostering diversity in staffing, and from working more with other actors, particularly Indigenous Peoples. For communities, a shift towards more Indigenous-led evacuation planning and investment in shelter-in-place facilities to protect from wildfire smoke could reduce the need to evacuate.

The future of wildfire in Ontario comes with many uncertainties. However, it is certain that climate change will create more dangerous conditions for wildfire, deepening challenges, and adding complexity. Ultimately there is no silver bullet that will address the challenges presented in this thesis. There are, however, many ways forward, and many actions to take. There is no time to waste.