

# Impact of the 2025 Canadian Wildfire Season on Workers' Compensation in Canada

## 1. Overview of the 2025 Canadian Wildfire Season

The 2025 wildfire season in Canada has been extraordinary in its early scope and intensity. By early June 2025, there were roughly **1,753 wildfires** reported across the country, burning an estimated **2.6 million hectares** of land <sup>(1)</sup>. These fires have affected nearly every region from coast to coast, a situation many officials link to exceptionally warm, dry conditions and the ongoing effects of climate change. Multiple provinces – including **Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, and even Newfoundland and Labrador** – have faced significant wildfire outbreaks simultaneously <sup>(2)</sup>. This widespread activity led to mass evacuations (over **32,000 residents** displaced as of early June <sup>(1)</sup>) and states of emergency declared in provinces like Manitoba and Saskatchewan <sup>(2)</sup>.

This season's statistics already far exceed historical averages. For example, **Saskatchewan recorded 251 wildfires by June**, compared to a five-year average of about 141 by that date <sup>(3)</sup>. Manitoba's wildfire agency noted that nearly 200,000 hectares burned in just one month – roughly **triple the normal area** for that period <sup>(4)</sup>. Tragically, at least **two fatalities** have been attributed to the fires (civilians trapped by fast-moving blazes), and hundreds of structures have been destroyed <sup>(5)</sup>. The fires' impacts have not been confined to burn zones; massive smoke plumes have darkened skies and degraded air quality across Canada and beyond. In early June, thick smoke triggered air quality warnings in major cities (Ottawa, Toronto, Montreal) and even drifted into the United States and Europe <sup>(6)</sup>, underscoring the far-reaching consequences of these wildfires.

Overall, the 2025 wildfire season is shaping up to be one of Canada's most challenging on record. The *unprecedented scale* of fires across nearly all provinces has created a national crisis that tests not only firefighting resources and disaster management but also the systems that support affected workers, such as the **workers' compensation boards (WCBs)** in each jurisdiction. The following sections examine how this severe wildfire season is impacting worker health and safety, the nature and volume of workers' compensation claims, and how employers and compensation boards are responding to the emerging challenges.

## 2. Health and Safety Risks to Workers

Wildfires present a multitude of **health and safety hazards** for workers, especially those on the front lines and those exposed to wildfire smoke or extreme heat. The risks in 2025 are elevated given the intensity of the fires and the breadth of areas affected:

- **Firefighters and Emergency Responders:** Firefighters battling these wildfires face obvious dangers: burns, falling trees, and other traumatic injuries, as well as smoke inhalation and exhaustion. In one instance this season, a firefighter in Manitoba was **severely injured by a falling tree** while fighting

a blaze, underscoring the physical dangers of the job <sup>7</sup> . Firefighters work long hours in high heat, carrying heavy gear, which raises the risk of **heat exhaustion, heatstroke, and dehydration**. They are also exposed to thick smoke on the fire line; without proper protection, this smoke exposure can lead to acute and chronic respiratory problems. Additionally, the psychological toll is significant – witnessing devastating fires and destruction can contribute to **stress and trauma**, including potential post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

- **Outdoor Workers in Affected Areas:** Beyond firefighters, many other workers are exposed to wildfire conditions. This includes construction crews, agricultural and forestry workers, utility repair teams, delivery personnel, and others who must work outside. Wildfire smoke has blanketed large regions of Canada, and **breathing in the smoke poses serious health risks**. The smoke contains fine particulate matter and toxic gases that can penetrate deep into the lungs <sup>8</sup> . Workers breathing smoky air may experience irritation of the eyes, nose, and throat, headaches, or dizziness. More seriously, inhalation of fine particles can **aggravate asthma and other pre-existing lung or heart conditions** and even lead to new respiratory illnesses <sup>8</sup> . Many Canadian safety agencies have warned that as smoke levels increase, **health risks increase** in tandem, particularly for those exerting themselves outdoors <sup>9</sup> . In 2025, some communities experienced some of the worst air quality in memory, meaning outdoor workers faced conditions hazardous to their health.
- **Heat and Combined Stressors:** Wildfire season often coincides with extreme heat waves. Workers laboring in high temperatures face the threat of heat-related illnesses. **Heat stress** can quickly progress to heat exhaustion or life-threatening heatstroke, especially when people are performing strenuous tasks or wearing heavy protective gear. The wildfire situation amplifies these dangers: heavy smoke can reduce visibility and air quality, forcing workers to breathe through masks or respirators that add physical strain. According to WorkSafeBC, the combination of **extreme heat and wildfire smoke** can lead to significant health issues for workers, such as heatstroke and respiratory problems <sup>10</sup> . In other words, the twin hazards of heat and smoke make working conditions doubly dangerous, requiring vigilant safety measures.
- **Other Safety Hazards:** Wildfires create indirect dangers as well. Poor visibility from smoke or darkness can lead to accidents (for instance, vehicle or equipment accidents for workers driving through smoke-blanketed areas). Falling ash and embers pose fire risks even away from the main blaze. Workers involved in evacuation efforts or community support may encounter **dangerous situations** such as unstable structures, downed power lines, or panicked public. Furthermore, if industrial facilities are caught in wildfires, responders might be exposed to additional chemical hazards. All these conditions require careful safety planning.
- **Mental Health Impacts:** The disaster context of widespread wildfires is stressful for everyone, and workers are no exception. Emergency responders and public safety personnel often see homes destroyed and residents in distress, which can be emotionally taxing. Even workers not directly fighting fires – such as those assisting in evacuation centers or cleaning up damage – may experience **anxiety, grief, or trauma** from the situation. This psychological impact can lead to conditions like PTSD or depression. Many Canadian jurisdictions already acknowledge this risk: for example, most provinces have presumptive workers' compensation coverage for PTSD in first responders, meaning firefighters or paramedics who develop PTSD are presumed to have a work-related injury. The 2025 wildfire season, with its intensity and repeated critical incidents, is likely to contribute to more mental health strain on the workforce.

In summary, the wildfire crisis raises numerous health and safety concerns for workers. From the immediate physical perils faced by firefighters, to the widespread exposure of outdoor workers to smoke and heat, to the often-unseen mental health struggles, the risks are pervasive. Employers and safety regulators have been urging heightened precautions – as discussed in the next sections – to mitigate these risks and protect workers during this extreme season.

### 3. Implications for Workers' Compensation Claims Volume and Types

The surge in wildfire activity during 2025 has direct consequences for the **workers' compensation system** across Canada. As workers suffer injuries or illnesses related to the wildfires, they turn to provincial workers' compensation boards (WCBs) for support. Early indicators suggest that **claim volumes are increasing**, and a broad range of claim types are emerging from this disaster:

- **Respiratory Illness Claims:** Many workers exposed to heavy wildfire smoke have experienced respiratory problems – for example, firefighters or outdoor workers developing breathing difficulties or acute smoke inhalation injuries. Workers' compensation boards across Canada are bracing for a spike in claims for **smoke-related illnesses** such as bronchitis or asthma exacerbation <sup>11</sup>. In some cases, workers with pre-existing conditions (like asthma or heart disease) may file claims if workplace smoke exposure aggravated their condition significantly. The **surge in air-quality related health issues** is expected to translate into more workplace injury reports and claims for medical treatment or time off due to breathing problems.
- **Heat Stress and Heat Illness Claims:** With record-breaking heat accompanying the wildfires, there is an elevated risk of claims for **heat exhaustion or heatstroke** suffered on the job <sup>11</sup>. Outdoor workers fighting fires or doing physical labor in protective gear are especially vulnerable. A worker who collapses from heatstroke while fighting a wildfire or working in extreme heat may file a compensation claim for that injury. These conditions can require hospitalization and time off to recover, making them compensable if caused by work conditions. WCBs anticipate more **heat-related injury** claims during this season than usual, given the prolonged high temperatures in many regions.
- **Traumatic Injury Claims:** The nature of wildfire response work unfortunately leads to traumatic injuries – burns, cuts, broken bones, or other physical injuries. For example, if a firefighter falls or is struck by debris (as happened in the Manitoba falling-tree incident), that injury is clearly work-related and will result in a compensation claim <sup>7</sup>. There have also been vehicle accidents involving emergency crews and accidents during evacuations or cleanup operations. All such **acute injuries** sustained in the line of duty are likely to push up the claims numbers. In 2025, with so many personnel deployed to fire zones, the **workplace injury claim count** (especially among fire crews and support workers) is expected to rise accordingly.
- **Occupational Disease (Long-Term) Claims:** While most wildfire-related claims in 2025 will be for immediate injuries or illnesses, there is potential for longer-term occupational disease claims emerging from repeated exposures. For instance, firefighters heavily exposed to smoke year after year might later develop respiratory diseases or even certain cancers. Many provinces have **presumptive coverage for firefighters** for specific cancers and heart injuries due to occupational

exposure. If any wildland firefighters later suffer such conditions, their 2025 exposures could be a contributing factor in claims (though those claims might come years down the line). Additionally, prolonged smoke exposure for outdoor workers could potentially contribute to chronic lung conditions, which might become a workers' compensation issue in the future.

- **Psychological Injury Claims:** Canadian workers' compensation systems in recent years have recognized psychological injuries like PTSD as valid work-related injuries, particularly for first responders. The extreme nature of the 2025 wildfires – the fatalities, close calls, prolonged danger, and pressure – can be traumatizing for those involved. It is anticipated that **claims for PTSD and other mental health conditions** will emerge among firefighters, police, paramedics, and even some civilian workers who experienced trauma during the wildfires <sup>11</sup>. For example, a firefighter who witnessed a colleague's severe injury or a community evacuation might later exhibit PTSD symptoms and seek compensation for psychological injury. Given that most provinces have instituted presumptive PTSD coverage for first responders, these claims may be processed more readily. Nonetheless, a high volume of such claims would present a challenge for WCBs in providing timely mental health support and benefits.

Overall, the **workplace claims profile** of the 2025 wildfire season spans from physical injuries and illnesses to psychological impacts. Workers' compensation boards are gearing up for a **significant influx of claims** related to the wildfires <sup>11</sup>. This could include everything from an injured firefighter's time-loss claim, to a teacher's claim for smoke-induced asthma exacerbation due to school smoke exposure, to a utility worker's claim for heat exhaustion. The diversity and volume of claims will test the capacity of WCBs to respond quickly and fairly. It also underscores the importance of preventative measures – every claim represents a worker harmed, so reducing risks in the first place is critical. The next section discusses how employers, policymakers, and WCBs are responding to these risks and the challenges they face in doing so.

## 4. Workers' Compensation Policy Responses and Challenges

The 2025 wildfire disaster has prompted action and reflection among **employers, workers' compensation boards, and policymakers** across Canada. They are confronted not only with an immediate surge in claims but also with the need to adapt policies and practices to protect workers in an era of more frequent extreme events. Below is an analysis of key responses and ongoing challenges:

**Employer Preparedness and Preventative Actions:** Employers have a fundamental duty to ensure a safe work environment, and this duty is being tested by the wildfire conditions. In anticipation of wildfire season, safety authorities urged employers to **plan ahead** and implement measures to minimize harm to workers. For example, WorkSafeBC and other provincial agencies issued guidance for employers to address both extreme heat and wildfire smoke hazards <sup>10</sup>. Employers are advised to **monitor air quality** indices daily and heed public health advisories. When smoke levels are high, employers should adjust work schedules or locations – for instance, **rescheduling outdoor work** to times of better air quality or relocating tasks to less affected areas. Providing appropriate protective equipment is also essential: employers are being encouraged to supply **N95 respirators or similar masks** to workers when air quality is poor, and to ensure these are properly fitted and used. Regular rest and hydration breaks are critical in hot and smoky conditions, so many employers are emphasizing the need to **keep workers hydrated and cool** to prevent heat stress. In extreme cases, employers must be ready to **halt work or evacuate worksites** if conditions become too dangerous (for example, if a fire encroaches on a job site or if smoke makes breathing

hazardous). These proactive steps – monitor, mask, hydrate, evacuate when needed – can save lives and also reduce the number of compensation claims by preventing injuries in the first place <sup>12</sup> .

**Workers’ Compensation Board (WCB) Responses:** The provincial WCBs themselves have been responding on multiple fronts. Firstly, boards are ensuring that workers affected by the wildfires know how to get help. This includes communication efforts about the **coverage of work-related wildfire injuries** and the process for filing claims. Some WCBs have set up dedicated information pages or hotlines related to wildfire claims, recognizing that workers and employers in hard-hit areas may have questions about coverage. There is precedent for special handling of disaster-related claims – for instance, in past wildfires or floods, certain boards have expedited claim processing for emergency responders. In 2025, WCBs are **bracing for high claim volumes** and may be reallocating resources to process wildfire-related claims quickly so that injured workers receive wage-loss benefits and medical support without delay. Another response has been internal policy reviews: boards are examining whether existing compensation policies adequately cover the types of situations arising from the wildfires. By and large, if a worker is on duty (e.g. firefighting, or working outdoors per employer direction) and is injured or falls ill due to wildfire conditions, that is considered work-related and compensable. Boards are reinforcing this understanding so that claims decisions are consistent.

One notable trend is the emphasis on **mental health support**. Given the traumatic events of this wildfire season, some boards have highlighted the availability of psychological injury claims and associated services (such as counseling or employee assistance programs). For example, a firefighter in Saskatchewan or Alberta who is struggling emotionally after weeks of battling fires should be aware that PTSD is recognized and that they can access treatment through a claim. The WCBs’ role is not only to provide compensation but also to facilitate **rehabilitation and return-to-work**. In disaster scenarios, return-to-work can be complex – a firefighter with lung issues or anxiety may need gradual re-entry to work or temporary reassignment. Boards are likely coordinating with employers on modified duties for those recovering from wildfire-related conditions.

**Policy Developments and Shifts:** The extreme conditions of 2025 are prompting broader policy discussions. **Policymakers** (including provincial governments and occupational health regulators) are being urged to strengthen regulations and guidelines to better protect workers in these events. One key area is establishing **enforceable safety standards for wildfire smoke and heat exposure**. Currently, not all jurisdictions have specific occupational exposure limits for wildfire smoke. Groups like the AWCBC have noted that clear standards (for example, air quality index thresholds at which work must be suspended or respirators provided) would help ensure employers take consistent, adequate action <sup>13</sup> . Policymakers are also considering expansions of coverage. This could include making sure that **all workers affected by wildfires are eligible for compensation**, including perhaps some who might fall outside typical coverage. For instance, volunteer firefighters or members of Indigenous emergency teams might not be regular employees – provinces may need special provisions to cover them if injured. There are calls to **expand coverage definitions** so that conditions like certain lung diseases or stress injuries related to wildfires are explicitly recognized, easing the burden of proof on workers <sup>13</sup> . Another policy focus is on supporting vulnerable workers: those with underlying health issues, or those in precarious jobs who might be most exposed (like migrant farm workers working through smoky conditions). There is advocacy for ensuring these workers are not forced to choose between their health and a paycheck during environmental disasters <sup>13</sup> . Some have suggested emergency relief funds or legislative amendments so that if a workplace is shut down due to wildfires, workers can receive income support (beyond what workers’ comp provides, since WCB only covers actual injury/illness, not preventive stoppages).

**Interjurisdictional Coordination:** Because the wildfires have mobilized crews across provincial lines – for example, firefighters from Ontario going to help in Quebec, or crews from the U.S. coming into Canada – coordination among compensation systems is crucial. Fortunately, Canadian WCBs have long-established agreements to handle such situations. Under the **Interjurisdictional Agreement (IJA)** on workers' compensation, boards agree to cover workers from other provinces as if they were their own, to ensure seamless coverage when work crosses borders <sup>14</sup>. This means if an Alberta firefighter is injured in Manitoba, there are protocols so that their claim is handled without gaps or confusion, and costs are apportioned appropriately. The 2025 season is putting that agreement to the test with so much inter-provincial assistance. So far, the IJA framework provides confidence that **workers are protected no matter where in Canada they are sent** to fight fires, maintaining consistent and fair treatment across jurisdictions <sup>14</sup>. A remaining challenge is ensuring all those who respond (including out-of-country helpers or volunteers) have some coverage – typically, visiting firefighters would either be covered by their home jurisdiction or by the host province under special arrangements.

**Systemic and Long-Term Challenges:** While immediate responses are underway, the 2025 wildfire crisis is also exposing longer-term challenges for workers' compensation in the face of climate change. One challenge is **financial and administrative strain**. A spike in claims, especially if it includes costly claims (for serious injuries or prolonged illnesses), can put pressure on the accident funds that WCBs maintain. If such extreme seasons become frequent, boards may need to adjust their insurance funding models and premiums to account for the higher risk in certain industries (for example, forestry, public safety, and construction sectors might see rate increases due to wildfire-related claims experience). Another challenge is **distinguishing work-related causes** in an environmental disaster. For example, if smoke is everywhere and a worker has respiratory issues, the question can arise: was it occupational exposure or general ambient exposure? Workers' comp requires that the injury or illness be predominantly caused by work. Regulators may need to clarify guidelines for claims due to widespread events – generally, if the job forced the worker into a hazardous exposure that the general public could avoid, it strengthens compensability. Clear communication on such nuances is needed to avoid confusion or denial of legitimate claims.

Finally, there is the broader **prevention challenge**: Workers' compensation organizations increasingly emphasize accident prevention and occupational health. The reality of mega-wildfires means prevention has to extend beyond the typical workplace to the larger environment. WCBs and occupational health agencies may advocate for measures such as community disaster preparedness, better wildfire management, and climate adaptation strategies, recognizing that protecting workers in the long run will require society-level interventions. In the interim, 2025 has taught many hard lessons. It has highlighted the heroism and risks faced by workers on the front lines, and it has spurred important conversations about how our workers' compensation system can remain robust and responsive in an era of **intensifying natural disasters**.

**Conclusion:** The 2025 Canadian wildfire season's impact on workers and the workers' compensation system has been profound. The season provided a stress-test for policies and revealed where there are strengths (such as the interprovincial cooperation and presumptive coverage for certain conditions) and where there are gaps (such as specific protections against smoke exposure and support for all affected workers). Going forward, stakeholders – from employers and WCBs to governments – are likely to use the experience of 2025 to improve how we safeguard workers' health and safety in disasters, and ensure that those who do suffer work-related harm in such events are swiftly and fairly compensated.

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