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Alberta Professional Fire Fighters & Paramedics Association

Affiliated with
**International Association
of Fire Fighters**



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CATASTROPHIC TRAUMATIC EXPOSURE COVERAGE

On May 1, 2016, a wildfire burning to the southwest of Fort McMurray, Alberta, led to the declaration of a state of emergency. Two days later, the fire had reached Fort McMurray, forcing the evacuation of 88,000 citizens, and destroying 2,400 buildings. In total, the fire would consume more than 500,000 hectares. Though hundreds of homes were lost, fire crews battled the blaze for countless hours under hellish conditions and saw their efforts pay off; officials estimate they managed to save 85 to 90 per cent of the city. Without the efforts of those on the frontline, the outcome would have been much worse for the city of Fort McMurray.

Unfortunately, the challenges that First Responders faced during the Fort McMurray fires had a profound impact. Some fire fighters lost their own homes while mitigating the emergency, others are experiencing lasting health effects, and some are no longer with us, a likely result of the concentrated occupational exposures they faced. During the event, urban firefighting operations were largely conducted without the use of breathing apparatus. Once the initial supply of air bottles were utilized, the immense scale of the event did not allow for the logistical ability to refill emptied air cylinders. Two University of Alberta Studies have been conducted to assess long-term effects caused by long periods of particulate exposure. The data has shown that of the 1200 Alberta Fire Fighters that participated in the study, 1 in 7 have continued to have chronic issues after the blaze was extinguished.

These events are becoming more frequent. With Slave Lake, Fort McMurray, and the record setting wildfires we have experienced in 2023 in which Firefighters and other public safety officers tirelessly worked together to contain. These efforts have saved both life, and property, however, firefighters across Alberta expose themselves to immense smoke, reduced air quality and carcinogens released from hectares worth of burning forest and multiple house fires in the wildland urban interface.

With the increase in request for aid anticipated, and the government funded Responding to the Interface (RTI) training being provided to structural firefighters the need for this coverage is a priority while protecting communities across Alberta. In order to best protect our communities all professional firefighters could be utilized for a catastrophic wildfire.

Recommendation

That all Public safety personnel who deployed and worked at any Catastrophic Traumatic Event be eligible for presumptive WCB coverage, regardless of latency period. It will be presumed that those that develop long term health effects, including diminished lung function, cancer, and mental health injuries would have done so while conducting their duties during the Catastrophic Traumatic Event in question.



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