

North Shore ‘overdue’ for big fire, safety official warns

After stretch of warm, dry weather region is a ‘tinderbox’, says resident

Catherine Lloyd knows the power of nature when she looks off into the forest from her idyllic North Vancouver backyard.



ARLEN REDEKOP Bev Craig says she worries about the forest behind her home on Hyannis Drive in North Vancouver. “It is so dry back there,” she says.

Just metres from her back fence, a burnt cedar tree stump serves as a daily reminder of how perilously close residents are to a whole lot of trouble if a fire starts up in the woods surrounding their subdivision nestled into the lower slopes of Mount Seymour.

Two other blackened tree stumps are farther up the slope, all destroyed in past lightning strikes that were quickly contained by the district of North Vancouver’s firefighters.

“You can see some of the trees have been hit by lightning,” said Lloyd, 67, who moved into her Blueridge home in 1983. “That scares you.”

But these days, Lloyd and her neighbours along Hyannis Drive have a bigger fear as their beloved forest takes a beating from the unprecedented dry and hot conditions all spring long.

“It is a tinderbox back here right now. It would be a nightmare if a fire moved in,” Lloyd said.

Like her neighbours, Lloyd moved to the area because of the trees and a backyard looking out onto heavily wooded parkland. “This is such a lovely place to live,” she said. “You love it because of the trees.”

Lloyd's neighbour Bev Craig worries about cigarette butts being tossed to the ground. "Don't throw your cigarette butts out," she warned. "It is so dry back there."

In 2013, the District of North Vancouver began clearing the dense swath of trees and lush vegetation behind the upscale Hyannis Drive roadway as part of a comprehensive wildfire plan that identified 70 hectares of at-risk land.

Fiona Dercole, North Vancouver's manager of public safety, said following the report in 2007, the district secured provincial funding to begin cutting down those heavily wooded areas to provide both a better fire guard and significantly reduce the amount of fuel on the ground.

It costs about \$30,000 a hectare, and Dercole said they have cleared 42 hectares so far.

"We are thinning out the forest," she said. "It is quite stark when you're used to lush, dark forest. But people like it. It is getting light into their backyards."

That excuse doesn't work to allow owners of private property to cut down their own large trees! - cjk

Dercole said officials know warm and dry conditions are putting a lot of stress on the forest, and warned the North Shore is "overdue for" a big fire.

"There is a lot of fuel built up in the understory, and we have to do a better job of identifying the fuel risk," she said.

In West Vancouver, assistant fire chief Jeff Bush said firefighters are bracing for a busy summer with the hot and dry conditions.

Between June to September last year, West Vancouver had 28 fires, with 27 of them believed to be from cigarette butts.

"We have a considerable amount of urban interface and we are saying to people be very watchful," Bush said.

Bush said fire officials will have a public awareness campaign going into the summer months to remind drivers not to throw cigarette butts out the window, and for trail users to be mindful of the dry conditions and avoid smoking or building fires.

As part of their fire-prevention work, Bush said it is critical for people to immediately report any fire.

Bush said last summer the department was run off its feet with fires.

"It was a busy year for us," he said. "Fortunately, we have been very lucky."

Despite the heightened fire risk, Bush said officials prefer to keep the forests open.

"The people who frequent the trails, we rely on them as our eyes and ears," he said.

Dorit Mason, director of the North Shore Emergency Management Office, said everyone involved in emergency preparedness has seen the dramatic footage of people fleeing the wildfire in Fort McMurray, Alta.

"Everyone needs to understand it can happen so quickly," she said. "The discarded cigarettes can have devastating consequences."

If a wildfire results in people having to evacuate their homes, she said, residents need to be prepared.

“You need a grab-and-go bag with supplies ready,” Mason said. “When you are told to leave, you need to leave. By not leaving, it can put our responders at risk.”

If a wildfire develops, ground crews and air support can be brought in quickly through the provincial Coastal Fire Centre.

“Usually the conversation happens fairly quickly,” Donna MacPherson, Coastal Fire Centre’s fire information officer, said. “It is a strong team effort. We have strong connections with the local fire departments and do a lot of exercises with them.”

Bob Cavill, watershed manager for Metro Vancouver, said fire prevention is a huge part of the regional district’s work during the summer months. And while people are not allowed into the North Shore and Coquitlam watersheds, Cavill said they keep close watch over the 60,000 hectares of land closed off to protect the water supply.

“It doesn’t take too many warm days in a row to go from one fire rating to another,” he said.

Metro Vancouver posts the fire hazard for trail users. Cavill said in the upcoming days the fire risk could be considerable, but he is optimistic that rain will hit the region in June.

“Typically we can count on the June rain,” he said.

But in the short term, he said, the fire rating will remain a concern.



“By this week, some of our stations could have a high fire rating,” he said. “People need to be very respectful and understand the power of a wildfire.”