

‘If we’re going to live and work next to the forest, we’d better be wiser’

Simple measures could have prevented or slowed the spread of the Fort McMurray fire, had they been implemented.

Almost the entire Beacon Hill subdivision that lost an estimated 80 per cent of its 800 homes was built inside a highly flammable boreal forest, with just a thin buffer zone between fuel-heavy spruce trees and wood-frame houses.

It’s no accident that major pieces of public infrastructure and oilsands facilities were spared: They’re set back from tree lines and they’re built with fire-retardant materials. Some have their own firefighting resources, as well.

Inexplicably, Canada is not an especially fire-safe country, despite its forest cultures, industries and history of catastrophes. Strategies developed after events such as the 2003 fires in B.C. need to be better funded and observed, communities need to be better planned and built, and individual homeowners must finally take matters to heart, says David Andison, a landscape ecologist and adjunct professor at UBC.

“We’re our own worst enemies, sometimes. If we’re going to live and work next to the forest, we’d better be wiser and more humble about it,” Andison says. Don’t think that nature will co-operate: “Stopping forest fires from happening is just not on the program,” he says.

In forests that host urban settlements and individual homes, fuels — trees, brush, dead branches, other flammable debris on the forest floor — must be gathered, cleared and/or thinned.

Tree canopies must be opened overhead, so that in the event of an interface blaze, firefighters can effectively douse flames and smouldering embers from the air.

“We’ve got to give our firefighters a fighting chance,” Andison says.

Those are the basics, repeated in official reviews and reports following every major interface wildfire. Yet in heavily forested, fire-prone provinces such as B.C., fuel loads remain dangerously high.

Daniels and her colleagues have identified about 650,000 hectares of B.C. forest with “very high” fuel hazards. Despite long-standing recommendations to reduce the threat, she says, only about 10 per cent of the area has been “treated,” with debris cleared and trees thinned.

Treating the forest requires manpower and money, between \$5,000 and \$10,000 a hectare. Compared with the billions of dollars in property and public infrastructure lost across northeastern Alberta in the last eight days — not to mention the heavy emotional toll — it’s a small price to pay.