NWT Association of Communities

NWT WILDFIRE PREPAREDNESS WORKSHOP 2025

APRIL 23-25 | CHATEAU NOVA HOTEL | YELLOWKNIFE

Summary Report

The NWT Wildfire Preparedness Workshop hosted by the NWT Association of Communities in April 2025 was the first of its' kind. Communities and wildfire partners came together in this collaborative setting, leaving better prepared and eager to build on the momentum. This report is an overview of the workshop. The key recommendations that emerged are:

1. **Establish a dedicated Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) program for the NWT**
2. **Provide leadership and support for Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) development and implementation**
3. **Remove barriers and actively support fuel management in all communities**
4. **Support prescribed burning and Indigenous cultural burning for hazard reduction**
5. **Strengthen coordination and communication**

1 Coming together after the unprecedented wildfire season of 2023

The first territory-wide event focussed on community wildfire preparedness was held in Yellowknife on April 23–25, 2025. This inclusive gathering, the NWT Wildfire Preparedness Workshop (Workshop), brought together community and Indigenous governments, fire departments, GNWT staff, and wildfire experts to share experiences, learn from each other, and identify practical ways to strengthen wildfire preparedness across the territory. The Workshop was organized by the NWTAC in partnership with the Forest Management Division of GNWT-Environment and Climate Change (ECC), the lead agency for wildfire management in the NWT. Financial support was generously provided by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and ECC.

Wildfires are becoming more frequent and severe in the NWT, putting communities, infrastructure, and public safety at risk. The devastating 2023 wildfire season exposed major gaps in readiness.

The NWT's 29 communities in the boreal forest zone are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of wildfire due to their remoteness, and the lack of resilience and redundancy in critical systems such as power, health services, communications, and transportation. Urgent action is needed to improve our preparedness.

Responding to the extreme wildfire season of 2023 taught many lessons. Communities and wildfire partners needed a forum to collectively debrief, learn from each other and make plans for upcoming seasons. The approach to the Workshop leveraged the NWTAC's climate change risk-based partnership model, which pools resources and partners to support collaborative adaptation action on the most urgent risks facing communities. Community perspectives and priorities shaped the Workshop agenda which included presentations, interactive sessions, and regional discussions. Mental health was added as a key theme based on input from fire chiefs and community government staff in pre-workshop engagement sessions.

Who is the NWTAC?

The Northwest Territories Association of Communities, or NWTAC, is the non-profit, non-governmental organization representing the interests of all 33 NWT communities. For 60 years the NWTAC has presented a unified voice for communities on municipal goals and issues, based upon the membership's democratic adoption of resolutions and policy. We promote these priorities through advocacy to the territorial and federal governments and through our membership in the national Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

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NWT Association of Communities
Connecting Community Governments Since 1966

2 What happened at the Wildfire Preparedness Workshop

2.1 Who attended the Workshop

The Wildfire Preparedness Workshop saw a tremendous showing from community and Indigenous governments. Attendees came from 25 NWT communities, including Senior Administrative Officers, Band Managers, Fire Chiefs and firefighters, and Indigenous Governments. An incredible 85 workshop participants were from community and Indigenous governments; an additional 30 participants were GNWT staff, guest speakers, funders, and workshop facilitators. Concurrent with the workshop, ECC hosted two mornings of cross-training exercises for community fire departments. These firefighters (approximately 30 people) joined the workshop when they did not have cross-training.

2.2 What we did at the Workshop

Over three days, participants engaged in presentations, panels, learning sessions, and interactive discussions to share experiences, identify and prioritize community needs, and define practical steps forward. Sessions on the first two days fostered connections and understanding of wildfire preparedness principles and practices, culminating in planning sessions on the third day to act on what was learned.

The full agenda and all Workshop presentations and resources are available online in the workshop toolkit – *https://wildfirepreparedness2025.eventsnwtac.com*

2.3 *Community Wildfire Preparedness Basics*: Guidance for communities and a framework for the Workshop

While plenty of resources, programs, and organizations exist to support wildfire preparedness, the NWTAC found it difficult to navigate this space and find resources that fit with the realities of community governments in the NWT. In response to this gap, the NWTAC developed the guidance document *Community Wildfire Preparedness Basics* with input from ECC. It explains the numerous steps, plans, and resources that support wildfire preparedness as they relate to a community government's mandate. This document provided a unifying framework for Workshop components and was presented as a draft at the Workshop. Refining and updating this document should be done by wildfire preparedness partners.

2.4 The Wildland-Urban Interface: A key takeaway from the Workshop

Rodney Schmidt, High Level's Fire Chief, electrified the Workshop audience with his presentation on Alberta's journey to build their Wildland Urban Interface program (link to presentation *video* and *slides*).

Fire Chief Schmidt was part of the WUI team brought in from Alberta to support the response to fires threatening Hay River in 2023. He shared Alberta's experience of learning lessons from wildfire responses that had gone wrong and coming together across departments and organizations to create their WUI program. This compelling story inspired tremendous interest amongst Workshop attendees. Calls for a WUI program for the NWT became a recurring message in days 2 and 3 of the Workshop.

"The only reason that Hay River is still Hay River is because of WUI"

Kandis Jameson, Hay River mayor

"Right now, we have a gap in our wildfire response to the NWT when it comes to wildland-urban interface firefighting… A WUI program could give communities better tools, foster faster response rates and a real chance to protect themselves in a wildfire event. Fires don't stop at municipal boundaries, so we need to coordinate."

Vince McKay, MACA Minister

What is WUI?

WUI stands for wildland-urban interface. WUI is the space where areas developed by humans meet the wilderness or natural environment.

Fighting wildfires in these types of areas can be complicated because there is a mix of "natural fuel" (vegetation) and "built fuel" (buildings and infrastructure).

2.5 Key Themes from Regional Breakout Sessions

Participants were grouped by their home region to encourage strategic and collaborative discussions on top regional challenges and opportunities. Each brought forward distinct regional priorities, but several common themes emerged.

2.5.1 Beaufort Delta

- Sustained regional coordination, including regular meetings and a designated coordinator role.
- Community assessments of derelict buildings and vehicles as part of risk reduction efforts.
- FireSmart training for staff and residents.

2.5.2 South Slave

- Implement a WUI system as soon as possible. Build integration between ECC and community fire departments to standardize training, equipment sharing, and improve ability to aid other communities.
- Provide cross-training prior to season start and promote wildland and structural collaboration during the winter season.
- Establish an earlier start to the fire season and longer contracts to improve readiness.

2.5.3 Tłı̨chǫ/North Slave

- Accelerate fuel removal and management activities.
- Develop Interface Response Plans tailored to each community.
- Provide support and guidance to establish a prescribed burning program.

2.5.4 Sahtu

- Support and incentives are needed to recruit and retain people in community fire departments.
- Improve access to training, offer train-the-trainer opportunities.
- Increase mental health supports for responders and community members.

2.5.5 Dehcho

- Cross-training and implement the WUI system so community fire departments can work more effectively with wildland crews.
- Improve communication between GNWT departments (i.e. ECC, MACA, EMO) and communities.
- Support for equipment maintenance and upgrades.

3 Recommendations

The NWT Wildfire Preparedness Workshop was a great success. Many community and Indigenous governments took part, and feedback showed that participants found it useful and meaningful. The following recommendations reflect the main outcomes of the discussions. They present a clear call for urgent and coordinated action to ensure communities have the support they need to address growing wildfire risk.

1

Establish a dedicated Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) program for the NWT

Communities need the GNWT to create a permanent WUI program that includes:

- Qualified WUI teams equipped with specialized equipment that can be deployed to assist communities.
- Standardized, inclusive WUI training, cross-training, and certification to enable and empower interested community fire departments to work effectively with WUI teams.
- Clear and responsive coordination between MACA and ECC to co-manage operations and ensure they work together effectively.

This approach reflects the growing importance of working well together and widespread interest expressed at the Workshop in cross-training, mutual aid, and consistent equipment standards.

2

Provide leadership and support for Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) development and implementation

Communities call on the GNWT to:

- Lead the development and update of CWPPs and creation of Incident Response Plans in collaboration with communities.
- Streamline and modernize CWPP templates so they can be easily updated and integrated with community planning and budget processes.
- Support implementation of wildfire protection plans by providing consistent and coordinated resources and access to expertise across departments.

3

Remove barriers and actively support fuel management in all communities

Fuel management is a top priority across all regions. Communities call for:

- Streamlined approvals for vegetation management, especially in Designated Authority communities.
- Support for secondary uses of fuel breaks (e.g., trails, gardens, food production).
- Strengthened coordination between GNWT and regulatory bodies to remove bureaucratic hurdles and actively support timely fuel management, especially for Designated Authority communities.

Participants identified jurisdictional hurdles, lack of capacity, and the need for practical guidance as key challenges to fuel management.

4

Support prescribed burning and Indigenous cultural burning for hazard reduction

Communities want to use fire as a tool for wildfire mitigation. They want the GNWT to:

- Develop clear guidance on burn planning, liability, and safety.
- Recognize and support Indigenous fire stewardship practices. Connect traditional knowledge and Guardians programs with territorial fire response.
- Collaborate with communities to integrate prescribed burning and cultural burning into broader wildfire strategies.

Workshop discussions highlighted the need for long-term thinking, flexibility, and respect for traditional knowledge.

5

Strengthen coordination and communication

Improving coordination and communication between GNWT departments, and between the GNWT and community and Indigenous governments, is an essential part of making progress to build wildfire resilience in the territory. Communities call for:

- Funding for regional wildfire coordinators to support planning, training, and collaboration.
- Facilitation of regional equipment sharing and mutual aid agreements.
- Support for regional advisory committees and interagency meetings.

Participants across all regions emphasized the value of working together and the need for leadership structures that reflect local realities.

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Government of Northwest Territories

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