

Intelligence MEMOS



From: Glen Hodgson
To: Canadian wildfire watchers
Date: August 12, 2024
Re: **THE LESSONS FROM THE JASPER WILDFIRE**

Climate-related disasters including massive wildfires, severe flooding, and other extreme weather are hitting multiple regions of Canada. A few weeks ago, extreme rainfall and severe flooding disrupted life in Toronto and confirmed it isn't ready for the extreme weather associated with climate change.

Then Jasper was overwhelmed by a massive wildfire that quickly moved from the surrounding forest into the townsite, joining towns like Lytton, BC, and Fort McMurray. A recent detailed Australian research report, "Increasing intensity and frequency of the most extreme wildfire on Earth" in the journal *Nature Ecology and Evolution*, determined that wildfires had doubled in a decade globally with a changing climate. Loss of life was avoided in Jasper thanks to a timely decision to evacuate the town, but there has been severe destruction of residential, commercial and institutional property affecting a third of the town's structures. There has also been serious dislocation to many individuals and families, local businesses, and the community and surrounding region. Recovery will not be easy from the deep losses of personal and community wealth and disruption of economic activity.

Jasper is one of Canada's best-prepared towns for wildfire, thanks to its location in a national park. In conjunction with the province and municipality, Parks Canada has taken important wildfire prevention and mitigation steps over decades itself from wildfires, as they were understood at the time. Fire breaks were created around the town; underbrush that could fuel wildfires was cleared, and sprinkler systems in place on some built structures.

Unhappily, the fire that engulfed much of Jasper was hardly conventional; whipped onward by a combination of mountain pine beetle infestation that had killed many trees, high temperatures, dry conditions, and exceptional wind speed. The planning and action undertaken by Jasper and other towns in wildfire zones may have been appropriate to fight the last war, but maybe not the next one.

An arms-length inquiry into the Jasper fire would help provide an independent assessment of the preparations and response. We anticipate the need for a more forward-looking approach to climate risk mitigation and adaptation, with additional innovation, in communities like Jasper and elsewhere that face extreme fire risk.

Canadian governments appear to recognize the dangers associated with climate change and extreme weather. The federal government released its first national climate adaptation strategy last year, which was an important step in the journey toward a more climate-resilient economy, communities, and infrastructure. However, the Canadian Climate Institute has identified the need for significant new funding, sustained focus, and coordinated action by governments across the country if the federal adaptation strategy is to have a meaningful impact. Climate risk mitigation and management deserve priority attention.

Property insurance is another key tool for managing climate risk. Private insurers are the canary in the coal mine, warning us that more extreme weather events will lead to significantly expanded claims. We shouldn't be surprised if policyholders in general are required to share the risk through higher premiums on personal, commercial and institutional property. Property owners should also expect a nudge from insurers to take more responsibility for managing the climate-related risks to their property.

High-risk properties, ones repeatedly exposed to flooding and wildfire, deserve special focus. It is instructive that private property insurers are already pulling back from high-risk markets like California and Florida, which are repeatedly hit by extreme weather events and massive related claims.

Property on flood plains or in forested areas may have a harder time accessing insurance coverage in future, and at a much higher price. For half a decade, Canadian governments have been discussing how to provide adequate insurance cover for properties with a high risk of exposure to severe flooding. Various options have been outlined, but a proposed solution has yet to be announced let alone delivered. When an approach for managing severe flood risk is finally adopted, a similar approach may prove useful for properties with a high risk of exposure to wildfire, one that covers Jasper and other forested communities.

In short, to rebuild Jasper successfully and sustainably will require a combined effort that includes forward-looking coordinated planning and action, innovation in climate adaptation as well as mitigation, and better approaches to property insurance and risk management to ensure that at-risk properties can be insured and rebuilt.

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