

Parks Canada launching review of prescribed fire getting out of control

A prescribed fire in Banff National Park near the Town of Banff got out of control as of Wednesday afternoon (May 3).

JUNGMIN HAM RMO PHOTO



A helicopter dumps water on the fire near Banff on May 3.

JUNGMIN HAM RMO PHOTO

CATHY ELLIS

BANFF – Parks Canada has committed to a complete review of a prescribed fire getting out of control last week near the Banff townsite, forcing the evacuation of a local resort and several horses from the corrals.

The fire also burned three tack sheds to the ground at the horse corrals as well as the iconic Bill Peyto sign welcoming visitors to the town along Banff Avenue when flames jumped from Compound Meadows to the east side of the road near Banff Rocky Mountain Resort on the afternoon of May 3.

The fire was under control by the evening of May 6, secured at three hectares, with rain helping crews douse the flames. All prescribed fire operations in Compound Meadows have ceased for the spring and summer season as a result.

Officials with the federal agency say after-action reviews are completed after all wildfires and prescribed fires, and in the coming weeks, a complete review of what happened, lessons learned, and recommendations moving forward will be conducted.

“These are done to review operations and to assess what went well and what we can improve upon,” said Jane Park, fire and vegetation specialist for Banff National Park and incident commander for the Compound Meadows prescribed fire.

“Rest assured as we move forward, we will be looking at all of the operational aspects of the incident and ensuring we make adjustments where required.”

With temperatures soaring to 27 Celsius, the fire danger rating for Banff National Park is high with tinder dry conditions, Parks Canada says the controlled burn was still within prescription, which describes the conditions and procedures necessary to burn safely and effectively.

Parks Canada’s highly trained fire specialists take into account the weather, type of vegetation, moisture levels, terrain, anticipated fire behaviour and more when writing a prescription, and also define the boundary of the fire using natural or manmade barriers.

Park said wind speed and direction suddenly changed around 4 p.m., which was not in the forecast, with winds whipping to 28 kms/h from 10 km/h up that had been seen throughout the day until that point.

“We do have very specific conditions under which we burn and we had been monitoring the weather constantly – and even during the burn we monitor it hourly,” said Park.

“The conditions were within prescription and the fire behaviour we were seeing was within prescription.”

That said, Park notes sprinklers were being set up to protect Rocky Mountain Resort and the horse corrals, and many resources were on hand, including the Banff Fire Department throughout the day in the event of an unexpected change in the forecast.

“We were prepared for unexpected change; it was a little faster than anticipated,” said Park.

“But we have to conduct our prescribed fires when the conditions are ready to meet our ecological objectives as well as our objectives to protect the community.”

Silvio Adamo, fire chief and director of protective services for the Town of Banff, said the municipality was not in command of the prescribed burn so would not speculate on the data and information Parks Canada used in decisions.

“It is unfortunate that the prescribed burn became out of control, but we fully understand that these things can happen due to sudden weather shifts in the mountains,” he said.

“We are confident that Parks Canada took all precautions and analyzed the conditions before proceeding with the measures to create fire breaks.”

The main 125-hectare Compound Meadows prescribed fire, aimed at improving habitat in an important wildlife corridor between Banff Avenue, the industrial compound and Trans-Canada Highway, and to protect the Banff townsite from a future wildfire, was scheduled for May 5.

FIRE

CONTINUED ON A7

FIRE

CONTINUED FROM A6

Crews were blacklining – the pre-burning of grasses and shrubs adjacent to a control line before igniting a prescribed burn – to protect the wildlife exclusion fence along the Trans-Canada Highway when the fire jumped Banff Avenue.

“The fire moved through the actual burn unit and at a fairly high rate of spread towards Banff Avenue, and did spot across the road. The excursion was approximately three hectares outside of the unit,” said Park.

“We did have numerous firefighters and fire personnel on site, as well as the Town of Banff, when this occurred and we were able to deploy them into the areas east of Banff Avenue as quickly as we could – and we already had people on that side as well.”

With the assistance of helicopters bucketing water on the blaze, multiple fire crews from Parks Canada and the Town of Banff, and certified fire personnel from the Women-in-Fire Training Exchange (WTREX) who are in an intensive 12-day training exchange May 1-12, all worked to douse the flames.

The fire was classified as “being held” at about 11 p.m. on May 3 and “under control” on the evening of May 6, with rains helping fire crews in their efforts.

Banff Rocky Mountain Resort, the horse corrals and Mount View BBQ – a private reception and event venue – were evacuated. Guests were allowed back in their rooms by 9 p.m. the night of the fire and Mount View BBQ was permitted to resume operations the next day.

At least 10 horses were transported by trailer from the horse corrals to the Banff Trail Riders’ barns on the south side of the Bow River.

“Those areas were evacuated in an abundance of caution,” said Park.

The fire burned down three sheds at the Banff Light Horse Association corrals, including one belonging to the prominent Brewster family, and another owned by the Monods. In addition, memorabilia in a shed belonging to Jolene Brewster, who was named Calgary Stampede Rodeo Queen in 2000, was also destroyed in the blaze.

The Bill Peyto entrance sign to the Town of Banff on Banff Avenue also burned to the ground and there was some damage to the wildlife fencing along the Trans-Canada Highway.

“We can confirm that there was some minor damage to the Mountain View

cemetery, some of the trees, the grassed area and the stone wall,” said Adamo.

Banff’s fire department was already on site throughout the day supporting the WTREX program, with seven firefighters assisting Parks Canada with sprinkler deployment at Banff Rocky Mountain Resort and horse corrals, plus two structural protection trailers and its wildland engine.

But Adamo said Parks Canada command post called for additional resources to help manage the fire as the unexpected wind shift pushed the flames across Banff Avenue at about 4 p.m.

He said the fire department had a total of 16 members helping, along with two pumper trucks and two command units on scene.

Adamo said the Banff townsite was never in any danger of evacuation.

“Although the incident command confirmed the Town of Banff was not at any risk, we alerted our community out of an abundance of caution,” he said.

“We were never in a state of preparing to evacuate any part of town, and, indeed, no area of the town was affected.”

Operating under Park Canada’s command, the Banff Fire Department was deployed to the area east of Banff Avenue, near the Mountain View Cemetery and the Banff Light Horse Association corrals.

“The Town of Banff was fully engaged with Parks Canada in a support role and we have high praise for their effective management of the fire,” said Adamo.

Specific to the prescribed burn near the townsite boundary, which has now been put on hold, Adamo said the Town of Banff is grateful for the efforts of Parks Canada to increase protection around the community, noting fire is the No. 1 hazard to Banff.

“We know the extent of the planning, coordination and expertise that goes into the prescribed burn,” he said. “We have worked with Parks Canada many times in the past and we remain fully confident and thankful for their work on this activity.”

While the events of the prescribed fire getting out of control will be evaluated, Park said one lesson that has clearly been learned is how easily wildfire can develop given climate change and the large build-up of fuels across western Canada.

“If you could imagine if we had a wildfire that we were not anticipating, and we did not have resources on hand in the numbers that we did, that the result may have been quite a bit different,” she said.



TOP TO BOTTOM: Smoke billows along the Trans-Canada Highway on May 3; An Alpine Helicopter carries water towards the prescribed burn that got out of control; Flames shoot up behind wildlife fencing near the highway; Smoke can be seen from the highway at the entrance into Banff; A worker from Tree Dynamics removes a tree that burned during the prescribed burn.

JUNGMIN HAM RMO PHOTOS