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Air Safety and Drones

There is a new aircraft in the skies. Tiny. Cheap. Dangerous around wildfires.

Small unmanned drones are hitting the market in Canada. They are regulated under Transport Canada http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/civilaviation/standards/general-recavi-uav-2265.htm?WT.mc_id=1zfhj#safety but many people are unaware of the dangers they pose to other aircraft. Pilots of these tiny aircraft are advised to abide by the rules in Canadian Aviation Regulations, but many are unaware of the regulations in B.C. that pertain to wildfires.

In B.C., there is an automatic restricted airspace over any wildfire. This control extends five nautical miles of the wildfire in all directions, and 3,000 feet above ground level. The “wildfire” legally exists at the first wisp of smoke, and no posted notice is required to identify the ownership of this airspace by the Wildfire Management Branch. Why is that?

Often, the first response to a wildfire will be by fixed wing airtankers or by helicopters with or without crew on board. These aircraft may drop retardant or suppressants should the fire behavior warrant it. Those first moments can be crucial to prevent the escalation of the wildfire by delaying the wildfire’s movement and growth, and by relaying accurate information of the wildfire’s location and behaviour. These actions can allow time for crews to arrive and deploy their gear, and ensure the mobilization of additional resources if needed. Wildfires are common in the forested lands of B.C., and the automatic restricted airspace allows for rapid response when needed.

If anyone spots a drone – a pilot, or WMB staff in the air or from the ground – all WMB aircraft movement will be halted. Helicopters will set down at the closest available safe location, and fixed wing tankers will either enter a high holding pattern or return to base. This will continue until the drone is under the control of WMB personnel – if it flies away without the identification of the drone’s pilot, then additional

searches must be done to ensure the safety of the airspace prior to aircraft flying again.

The most dangerous and deadly activities undertaken on a wildfire are aviation operations. The aircraft fly at such low altitudes that there is very little time to recover from an incident. To WMB, the safety of the personnel onboard the aircraft is paramount, even over responding to the wildfire itself.

If people own drones and wish to fly these aircraft within the restricted airspace, they must contact the Fire Centre and receive approval from the appropriate personnel. This will ensure our staff are aware that these aircraft are in the vicinity, and help coordinate a flight path that will not interfere with other aviation operations.

These little buzzing aircraft may seem like toys, but they are very dangerous in the wrong hands, or at the wrong moment, and especially if their presence is unknown.



Jurisdiction

Jurisdiction is an important issue in how, and where, WMB responds to wildfire, and how, and where, prohibitions apply.

If you are trying to determine whether you can go ahead and have that campfire or Category 2 fire you must find out if the location you would like to have it has a local burn bylaw. If it is within an area governed by a local government or regional district which has a bylaw in place then their rules take precedent over any prohibition the Province institutes.

Be prepared to be specific, as it can get complicated. For example, some rural areas have agreements with their local urban fire departments to provide fire response, so in these rural areas they may actually fall under a municipalities’ fire bylaws. Complicated? Yes, but with a little patience and a few phone calls you will find the answer.

Remember, WMB is responsible for large forested areas and tends to have blanket prohibitions. Residents who want bylaws, or prohibitions, that are more reflective of an specific region should look to their regional district, municipal and other government leaders to implement a local burn bylaw.

To Report a Wildfire:
1-800-663-5555
Or Call *5555

To Report a Wildfire: 1-800-663-5555 Or Cell *5555

To Date in Coastal

Fires to Date

Person Caused 15

Lighting Caused 11

Total Number of Fires 26

Fire Danger Rating as of
May 22



Current Prohibitions
(within WMB jurisdictional area)

none

Local Government - Municipal or Regional Staff

During a wildfire, our interactions with local government fall into two broad groups.

First of all, we can rely on Fire Departments to provide expertise and initial fire response. If the fire is within Fire Department's jurisdictional area, they will usually assume the Incident Command role and our staff will assist. If the fire is within Wildfire Management Branch's jurisdictional area (WMB) then WMB provides Incident Command, with the Fire Department staff and equipment becoming a branch of that organization. If the fire is very large and complex, the Incident Command may be shared by the two agencies and is referred to as "Unified Command". In these cases, the protection of structures usually falls to Fire Departments due to their expertise and skills, which allows WMB staff to focus on the wildfire itself. Our response organizations speak the same language – the Incident Command System – and we often jointly work together on practice sessions and scenarios to ensure we work together seamlessly when needed.

The second role during a wildfire, and a very important one, is the care for their citizens. In the event of an evacuation alert or order, local governments will provide the support people need. This can be a massive

undertaking, and on large fires they will help find accommodations, meals, clothing and medicine for people who had to leave their homes. They can also assist with relocating pets and livestock, help friends and family make contact with one another, and arranging community meetings so that information can be shared. During all of this effort, routine local government business must carry on.

Obviously, this is more than the local government's staff can manage. Volunteerism from the community fills the gap. WMB staff have been on many fires where volunteers willingly and professionally answered phone calls from frantic mothers, farmers, and friends, made sandwiches, offered cookies and coffee, found eye glasses, and generally did anything they could to help people who were displaced by comfortable. Many times these people were under evacuation order themselves, and cheerfully carried on to help their neighbours. If you think you might like to be one of these people, please call your local government and offer your help. A lot of the training and organizing takes place before the incident, to ensure everyone know what to do if an emergency strikes.

At Coastal

The Coastal Fire Centre has had a slightly above average number of fires so far this year (statistics to the right). What is unusual is the number of lightning caused fires. Our 10-year average for this date is 20 fires, all of which would be person caused.

These fires are from almost continual lightning on the coast from May 10 onwards. While each strike does not produce a fire, any resulting fires may not be detectable until warm weather and a bit of wind makes them visible. We are asking the public's help to report forest fires—please call in COLUMNS of smoke to 1 800 663 -5555 or *5555 on cells.

While fire activity on the coast is close to average, crews have completed training and certifications and are ready for fire response. This has allowed Coastal staff to assist the northern part of the province with several large fires burning there.

Currently, the coast has sent almost 100 resources (including four Unit Crews and two Initial Attack Crews) to the Prince George and Cariboo Fire Centres. Sufficient resources have been retained to respond to anticipated coastal fires, and these resources can be recalled if needed. You can find current fire information about the coast, and wildfires around the province, at BCWildfire.ca.

Weather Fri May 22

SYNOPSIS: Patchy subtropical moisture drawn up from the south by a weak upper trough centered just offshore brings isolated thundershowers to the region again today, potentially carrying on into the evening/overnight. Otherwise, conditions in most areas trend slightly cooler with slightly higher humidities than have been reported over the last several days as the surface pressure gradient supports a steady feed of maritime air into most valley systems at the lower levels (although not yet strong enough to bring temperatures back down to seasonal normals). Expect similar conditions on Saturday.

Winds in most areas remain generally light – watch for strong downdrafts near convective cells. Widespread low cloud may invade coastal sections overnight tonight or Saturday night.

OUTLOOK: The narrow upper trough centered offshore develops into a small upper low that tracks southeastward Sunday through Tuesday, replaced by a Pacific ridge rebuilding to the NW. Bands of moisture rotating around a developing easterly flow will likely bring cloud and scattered showers (embedded thundershowers likely) to some of the typically drier sections of the southern third of the fire centre Monday or Tuesday while conditions trend warmer and drier from north to south elsewhere (inland temperatures back into the upper twenties with humidities between 20% and 25%).

6 TO 10 DAY: High pressure should remain in place over the region Wednesday through to next weekend to maintain above average temperatures (upper twenties to low thirties inland) and low humidities (dropping into the teens in many areas). The latest guidance has backed off somewhat on the likelihood of widespread lightning through the period, now hinting at the potential for a period of outflow conditions.