

# Parks to review burn program

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Parks Canada will review its prescribed burn program in the wake of dramatic flare-ups on the Fairholme benchlands in Banff and a runaway blaze in Jasper this summer.

One of the key aspects of the review will be to look at the advantages and disadvantages of lighting prescribed burns in the spring versus autumn.

Officials say it is not that burning in spring rather than fall is necessarily better, but that is a time of year that typically gives them the best conditions to do the job safely.

"They're different tools and they have different objectives, which would determine whether we do fall or spring," said Rob Walker, a Parks Canada fire and vegetation specialist.

"We review every fire event, whether it's a prescribed burn or a wildfire like in Kootenay. We bring in external expertise and review everything."

Parks Canada has come under criticism for igniting prescribed fires in the spring, amid arguments the smoke has been choking out tourists and hurting an already troubled industry.

In Jasper, a controlled burn that was initially slated to burn about eight square kilometres also flared up in summer, engulfing more than 80 square kilometres.

In Banff, the Fairholme bench holdover fires took an uncontrolled run along the power lines at their peak, shutting down power to Banff and Lake Louise for about three hours.

The spring prescribed fires on the Fairholme, which flared up in unusually hot summer weather, were lit to control

the spread of mountain pine beetle and to improve habitat for wildlife.

But a key goal was to protect the communities of Banff, Harvie Heights and Canmore from a catastrophic wildfire ripping through the valley, which has been untouched by fire for almost 100 years.

Historically, the peak wildfire season is in the heart of summer, but prescribed burns are not an operational option given the risk to people and property.

For spring fires, crews rely on June rains — typically the wettest month of the year — to extinguish the flames, but the rains never came this year.

In the fall, crews have a shorter burning window, but they do have the safety net of cooler weather and snow putting out any lingering flames.

Reese Halter, a forest biologist based in Banff, is a big supporter of prescribed fires, which he says are a rational and informed public policy choice.

Halter said fires have been suppressed for far too long, inadvertently creating dangerous conditions with more fuel loading in forests that would not occur naturally.

Working with prescribed fire is not without its danger, but it's a risk worth taking under careful management in an attempt to mimic nature, he said.

The smoke has caused some discomfort for people this summer, but in the end, the Bow Valley will be far safer, he added.

"At the end of the day, the biggest problem happening both in Alberta and British Columbia is we've got massive

fuel loadings on the forest floor," he said.

Meanwhile, two small fires that were sparked by lightning Aug. 27 near Taylor Lake in Banff National Park were quickly put out by initial attack crews. Four fires have started there this summer.

The 5,700-hectare lightning-sparked Tokumm fire in Kootenay National Park has merged with the 9,600-hectare Verendrye Creek blaze. The fire is now the largest fire in the park's recent history, bigger than the massive 1926 fire in Vermilion Valley.

Parks Canada officials say crews have been deliberately burning the 10 kilometres in between the two fires over the past week to control its further spread.

Spokeswoman Shelley Humphries said the fires are mostly contained, however there are still flare-ups in the peak afternoon burning periods.

"There is still active fire behaviour in the afternoons, but there's now no concerns about it leaving the Vermilion Valley and going into other valleys," she said.

"We will continue to have smoke and fire until we get some rain or snow, but there's nothing threatening anything or anyone."



Dr. Reese Halter