Fireline

Yukon Wildland Fire Management

2025 fire season in review

Yukon

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Fireline is the Government of Yukon's Wildland Fire Management Branch annual magazine.

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Manon Touffet

Follow Wildland Fire on social media through Yukon Protective Services and online at Yukon.ca/Wildfires.

Cover

A firefighter manages a pump during a prescribed burn in the Whitehorse South Fuel Break in August, 2025.

Haley Ritchie

Opposite

Calling in a helicopter bucket on the North Ferry Hill fire (MA-006).

Haley Ritchie

Extinguishment work on the North Ferry Hill fire (MA-006).

Haley Ritchie

Minister's Message

For Yukoners, living in the boreal forest means living with wildfire. Mitigation is an important part of our wildfire strategy, which is why we continue building the Whitehorse South Fuel Break and working with Yukon communities on developing Community Wildfire Protection Plans.

But more than anything, the people who make it their work to safeguard people, property, and infrastructure are our best protection and greatest asset.

If this report finds its way to you in a fire base or fire centre, please accept my heartfelt thanks for your hard work. Whether you're featured in this publication or happy to do your job outside of the spotlight, you have the gratitude of a thankful territory.

If you are reading this report somewhere else, I hope you enjoy learning about our wildfire service and trust you will take a moment to thank one of our firefighters or support staff the next time you see them.

Cory Bellmore
Minister of Community Services

Firefighters conduct a prescribed burn near Whitehorse in the spring.

Manon Touffet

2025 fire season in review

A typical Yukon fire season begins with person-caused grass fires in the spring followed by lightning-caused fires that are generally more difficult to manage during the longest, hottest days around Summer Solstice on June 21. Over the last 4 summers, intense midsummer lightning storms have ignited large numbers of wildfires in short periods of time. This surge in wildfire danger is often the defining factor of Yukon's wildfire season severity.

Firefighters light a controlled burn near Whitehorse.

Haley Ritchie

2025 fire season in review

During this summer's longest days near solstice, a significant lightning storm ignited 74 wildfires in just 6 days – over half of the Yukon's entire 2025 natural fire load. Extreme hot and dry conditions, combined with this overwhelming number of new fires, quickly resulted in a flame front glowing above Henderson Corner and heavy orange skies over Dawson City.

By the numbers

Region	District	# of fires	% of total burned area	Area burned (hectares)
Tatchun	Carmacks	10	8	13,542
	Ross River	10	1	1,738
Klondike	Dawson	35	37	61,882
	Old Crow	25	15	25,884
Kluane	Beaver Creek	7	6	10,813
	Haines Junction	10	8	12,779
Northern Tutchone	Mayo	37	23	38,893
Tintina	Watson Lake	1	0	0.01
Southern Lakes	Whitehorse	22	2	3,605
	Total	158	100	169,138

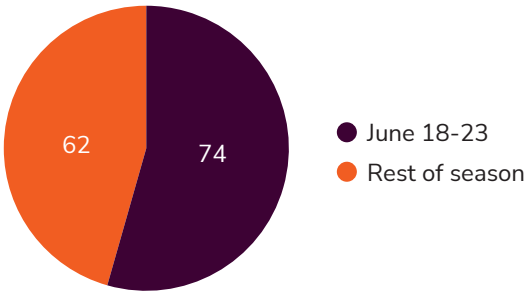
Liard and Taiga crews take a break from an operation.

Oliver Flegel

Quickly growing fires and tinder-dry conditions forced initial-attack crews to focus their efforts on the critical zone, where they were highly successful.

By July, several large lightning-caused fires required thorough responses. While this four-week period represented the summer's most intense workload, new fires and periods of hot weather stretched into September.

Discovery dates for 2025 lightning-caused wildfires



Total: 136

Members of the Prevention and Mitigation Unit.

Manon Touffet

This summer, 87% of full-response fires were detected and contained before they could grow past 1.5 hectares, or three sports fields, in size.

Additional firefighters and aircraft, supported by imported resources from the United States and other parts of Canada, protected communities threatened by major fires.

As summer turns to fall in August, wildfire activity is usually low enough for these roles to reverse and wildfire crews are released or assigned to mutual-aid assignments outside the territory. WFM manages wildfires using the Yukon Fire Management Policy that outlines prioritized response areas and the strategic decision-making process taken for each fire by an experienced firefighter.

Although this year saw fewer impacts to major highways, evacuation alerts were needed to prepare people in Keno, Beaver Creek and West Dawson during periods of increased risk.

2025 wildfire evacuation alerts

An evacuation alert is a warning for people in an affected area that an evacuation might need to take place.

Duration	Area	Fire
June 20 to June 29	Top of the World Highway and West Dawson	Quebec Creek (DA-012)
June 20 to June 30	Properties between Silver Trail Highway Kilometres 8 and 24	North Ferry Hill (MA-006)
June 20 to June 29	Properties near Henderson Corner and the Dempster Highway cutoff	Mount Leotta (DA-016)
June 24 to July 1	Ethel Lake Road	Francis Plateau (MA-019)
July 4 to July 15	Properties between Silver Trail Highway Kilometres 4 and 24	North Ferry Hill (MA-006)
July 4 to July 15	Keno, McQuesten Lake, Hansen Lakes and properties between Silver Trail Highway Kilometres 101-110	Ladue Lake (MA-022)
July 21 to July 23	Beaver Creek area	Mount Dave (BC-004)

Heavy structure protection equipment that was installed to defend West Dawson from the approaching Quebec Creek fire.

Manon Touffet

New tools were also part of this year's operations. Drone technicians and a contracted heavy structure protection team joined the campaign to manage Dawson-area fires. The heavy pumps and sprinklers were installed and tested in West Dawson, but fortunately rainfall provided a necessary break before the Quebec Creek fire (DA-012) could reach the area.

While the summer brought strain and uncertainty to communities, it also highlighted the skill and adaptability of our staff under pressure.

Wildland Fire Management's Prevention and Mitigation unit also made significant headway this year. 9 prescribed fires treated just over 78 hectares of forest in 4 of Wildland Fire's 6 fire management regions. As of the end of 2025, the 780-hectare Whitehorse South Fuel Break is 60% complete. This 20-kilometre-long project is designed to be a defensible access point on the Whitehorse side of the dense forest where a wildfire could be the greatest threat to the community. The fuel break generally follows the Copper Haul Road from near the McLean Lake Road towards Mary Lake and the South Klondike Highway. Like most of WFM's community projects, it has been developed alongside local partners and enjoys broad local support.

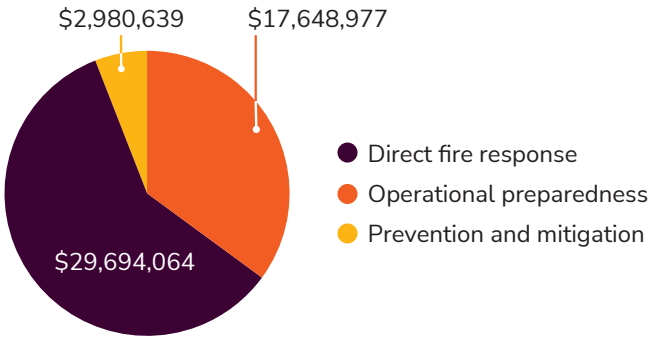
Along with the fuel break, Wildland Fire Management works with the City of Whitehorse to implement its Wildfire Risk Reduction Strategy. Elsewhere, Community Wildfire Protection Plans have been finalized in Dawson, Faro, Haines Junction, Teslin and Mayo, while plans are being developed in Watson Lake, Beaver Creek, Old Crow, Carcross/Tagish, and Burwash Landing/ Destruction Bay.

The FireSmart program continues to build steam. Alongside support for successful local organizations' wildfire prevention campaigns and annual spring outreach work, 55 community FireSmart projects received a mix of territorial and federal funding to make communities safer.

Lastly, Wildland Fire's public information resources remain on the cutting edge of national best practices. The Wildfire Hub, which was visited 157,941 times this summer, continues to be a popular source of truth for wildfire updates. This summer, our information officers worked with the government's eServices branch to test an email outreach program being considered for wider government use. The results were promising: by proactively sending wildfire updates alongside regular posted updates, Wildland Fire has made it easier for people affected by emergencies to find out what is happening. What's more, the program allows for targeted communications that let major wildfire incidents create their own lists, which reduces spam while preserving update timeliness and accuracy. As of the end of 2025, Wildland Fire communicated through this email service over 41,400 times with over 3,000 people about crew hiring, wildfire updates, and prescribed-burn plans.

2025-26 Wildland Fire Management expenses

As of December 2025, WFM has spent $50,323,680 this fiscal year.



2025 wildfire cost averages

Average costs for wildfires based on their ignition point's management zone and response type shed light on how much managing a fire is likely to cost. In recognition of Yukon's remote landscape and rising fuel costs, 62% of this year's direct fire costs were contracted aviation expenses.

		Number	Average cost
Type	Full	71	$44,488.75
	Modified	26	$587,860.68
	Monitored	73	$5,447.68
Management Zone	Critical	29	$6,503.29
	Full	25	$348,674.80
	Strategic	29	$220,208.81
	Transitional	30	$97,458.98
	Wilderness	18	$10,056.20

Taiga crew posing with BC firefighters.

Oliver Flegel

Notable fires

Several wildfires stood out this summer for their potential or real impacts to people, communities, infrastructure like highways.

North Ferry Hill (MA-006)

REPORT DATE	
June 18	
CAUSE	SIZE
Lightning	13,000 hectares
RESPONSE	
ZONE	TYPE
Full	Modified

After a 2024 fire burned south of Stewart Crossing, this year the area north of the turnoff experienced a lightning-caused fire. The North Ferry Hill fire began in mid-June. Crews quickly installed structural protection on nearby properties, and an evacuation alert was issued for the Silver Trail as the fire moved east. At its most active, the fire was bearing down on the Ferry Hill lookout tower, leading to the precautionary evacuation of its personnel. Cooler, wetter weather eventually helped crews secure the perimeter of the fire, and the evacuation alert was rescinded.

Above image

The North Ferry Hill fire (MA-006).

Haley Ritchie

Below image, and opposite page

Extinguishment work on the North Ferry Hill fire (MA-006).

Haley Ritchie

Manon Touffet

Quebec Creek fire (DA-012)

REPORT DATE	**June 19**
CAUSE	**Lightning**
SIZE	**3,709 hectares**
RESPONSE	
ZONE	**Full**
TYPE	**Modified**

The Quebec Creek fire (DA-012) was a quickly growing fire that ignited about 9 kilometres from Upper West Dawson. It prompted an evacuation alert and the help of an Alberta heavy structure protection unit to prepare West Dawson in case the fire reached the wildfire-urban interface. The nearby Mount Leotta fire (DA-016) prompted another evacuation alert east of Dawson. Both fires were organized into the Smitty Fire Complex, named after longtime Wildland Fire meteorologist Mike Smith after his departure from the agency. At its peak, residents experienced orange skies and had to limited Yukon River ferry crossings to essential trips and the Yukon River Quest was cut short for the second year in a row. Fortunately, the weather broke before the fire reached any structures. Crews, aided by an American incident management team, were eventually able to contain both fires by mid-July.

Rabbit Creek fire (DA-007)

REPORT DATE
June 18

CAUSE	SIZE
Lightning	12,496 hectares

RESPONSE

ZONE	TYPE
Transitional	Modified

The Rabbit Creek fire was a large, lightning-caused wildfire near the Dempster Highway. Crews protected nearby structures and focused on indirect attack of the fire, including through construction of a dozer guard, but the fire remained active until July.

Ladue Lake fire (MA-022)

REPORT DATE
June 25

CAUSE	SIZE
Lightning	5,500 hectares

RESPONSE

ZONE	TYPE
Strategic	Modified

The Ladue Lake fire ignited 5.5 kilometres from Keno City. The wildfire response prioritized building a machine guard around the fire's eastern edge. While swampy terrain between Keno City and the fire slowed fire behaviour, an evacuation alert was put in place for Keno City. Fortunately, containment was successful and the evacuation alert was lifted July 15.

DA-007 as seen from above Henderson Corner.

Alex Klubi

Carmanah Wildfire and New Brunswick fire crews assigned to MA-022 near Keno.

Warren Zakus

Dawson crews burning-off fuel on DA-05.

Phoenix Skailes

The Lacelle Lake fire (HJ-007)

REPORT DATE
June 21

CAUSE	SIZE
Lightning	10,776 hectares

RESPONSE

ZONE	TYPE
Strategic	Modified

While it never challenged any structures in the area, the fire did burn along the Aishihik Lake Road and interrupted access to the north end of the lake, particularly for members of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations needing access to cabins. WFM worked with CAFN to safely facilitate access to the area during periods of fire activity. Ignition operations took place to limit the growth of the fire, which saw reduced activity by mid-September.

Francis Plateau fire (MA-019)

REPORT DATE
June 22

CAUSE	SIZE
Lightning	1,200 hectares

RESPONSE

ZONE	TYPE
Strategic	Modified

The Francis Plateau wildfire prompted an evacuation alert centred on Ethel Lake, located east of Stewart Crossing. The fire was visible from the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun culture camp and other residences along the end of Ethel Lake Road. Protective sprinklers were installed, and the Ethel Lake Road was widened to act as a fuel break. While the fire was visible from the culture camp, it never descended the mountain and was eventually secured by firefighting crews.

A firefighter calls in helicopter bucketing support on the Francis Plateau fire (MA-019)".

Extinguishment work on the North Ferry Hill fire (MA-006).

Haley Ritchie

Yukon firefighters board a plane bound for Alberta and Saskatchewan.

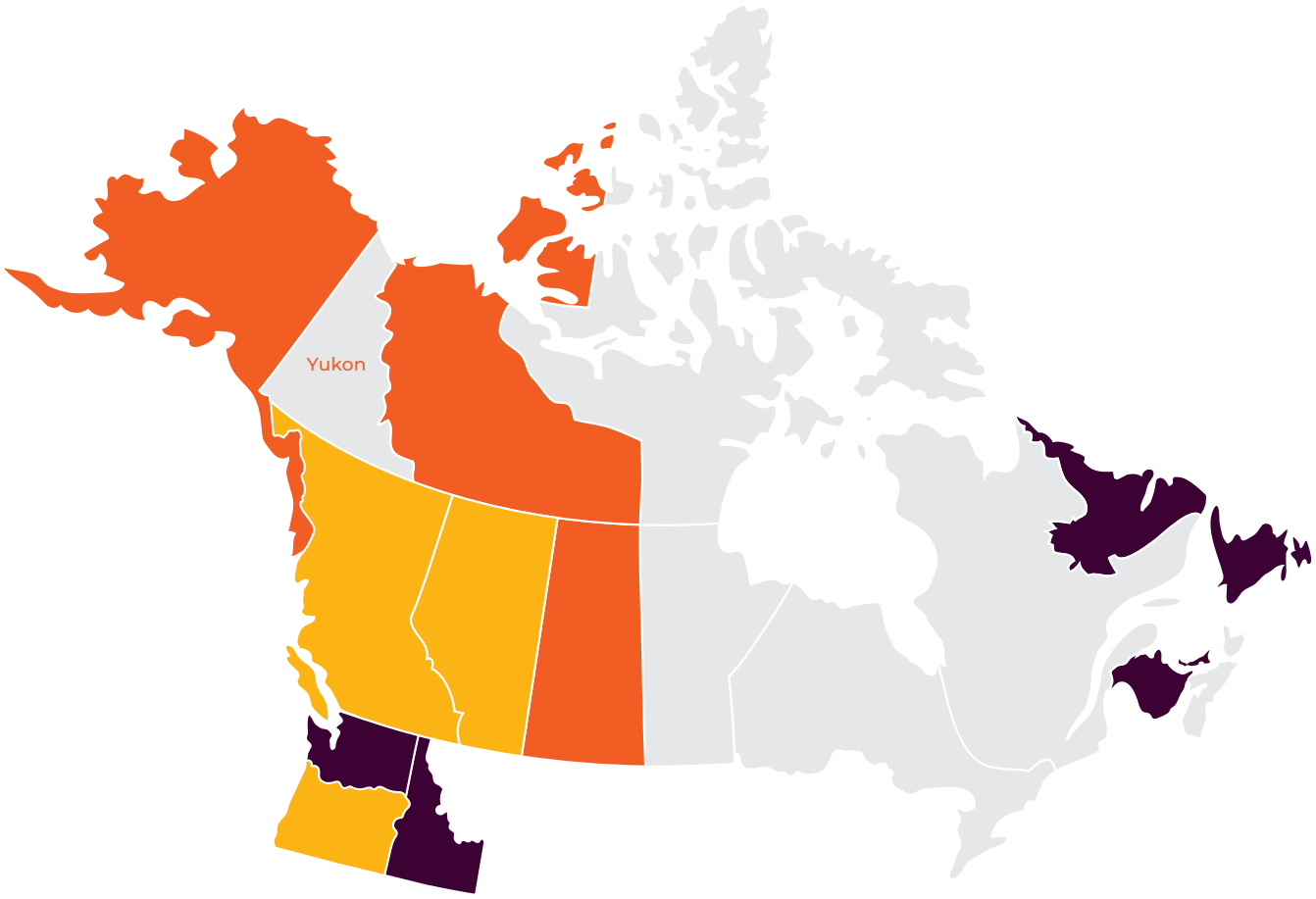
Manon Touffet

Mutual aid

During the 2025 fire season, Wildland Fire Management (WFM) was once again reminded of the strength found in collaboration. This year, we were grateful to receive support from across Canada and the United States. In total, 192 wildfire personnel from outside of the Yukon supported this summer's fire responses.

These dedicated professionals played a crucial role in helping us manage challenging fire conditions during peak season.

At the same time, WFM personnel also stepped up to assist beyond our own borders. In total, 76 Yukon personnel helped with responses in Canada, the Western United States and Alaska.



Senders
- New Brunswick
- Newfoundland and Labrador
- Prince Edward Island
- Washington
- Idaho

Receivers
- Northwest Territories
- Saskatchewan
- Alaska

Both
- British Columbia
- Alberta
- Oregon

British Columbia firefighters deployed to the Yukon in June 2025.

Manon Touffet

A Yukon First Nations Wildfire unit crew that deployed this summer.

Manon Touffet

New Brunswick firefighters deployed to the Yukon this summer.

Manon Touffet

Ignition point

A rare human-caused wildfire in the Takhini Valley shows the step-by-step science behind investigating – and proving – how a fire starts.

As the first 911 call came in from the Takhini Valley on a dry July afternoon in 2023, the flames were already racing uphill. There had been no lightning in the area that day, which meant one thing – the fire was human-caused.

But when investigators arrived at the smouldering edge of a gravel pit where the fire had started, the clues were scarce: a spray paint can, a handful of bullets, and several 911 recordings.

What had caused this mysterious fire?

In the Yukon, most wildfires are sparked by lightning. The rest fall into the category of "human-caused."

Sometimes the cause is obvious – an abandoned campfire tells its own story. But when the start is unusual, especially if criminal charges could be involved, the case lands with the territory's fire marshals.

The National Fire Protection Association guides these investigations, explained Deputy Fire Marshal Colin O'Neill. "Whether the incident is a structure fire or wildfire, we use a systematic, scientific approach," said O'Neill.

To his knowledge, the office has never investigated an incident of arson that resulted in a wildfire. Much more common is an accidental start or negligence.

For Chris Green, the Deputy Fire Marshal at the time of the Takhini Bridge fire (XY-019), the challenge was to work backward from the blackened forest to the moment of ignition.

"I find [fire investigations] a bit fascinating," said Green. He likes "being able to find answers and solutions when there's nothing left but rubble. I found it interesting and intriguing at the same time."

Step one was scene security: closing off the area, taking photographs, and recording detailed notes before anything was disturbed. Then came interviews with Wildland Fire personnel, the gravel pit supervisor, and nearby residents from Champagne and Aishihik First Nations.

"They kind of painted a picture that I had to look into," Green said, "but I didn't go off that solely."

After the preliminary grid search that took most of the day, a half dozen bullets were pulled along with a spray paint can. Green was looking for what could have started a fire. Carelessly tossed cigarettes and hot ATV tailpipes are common fire starts. He also wondered if bullets could have ricocheted off a piece of metal and sparked.

But the spray paint can didn't fit. "When I took a closer look at it, it was blown from the inside out," Green said – a sign it had overheated and exploded rather than been shot at.

"I find [fire investigations] a bit fascinating," said Green. He likes "being able to find answers and solutions when there's nothing left but rubble. I found it interesting and intriguing at the same time."

Opposite page

Putting a wildfire out is hard work – but so is the detective work that sometimes happens to find out how it started.

Haley Ritchie

Green got a tip from one of his interviews that Tannerite powder may have been involved. The explosive powder, used in firearms practice, is designed to produce a flash and bang for target shooters.

"If it was gun-related, where would I shoot from?" he thought, returning to the scene of the incident and trying to map out how the fire started.

To test the Tannerite theory, Green obtained some of the substance to test it with the fine fuels collected from the scene. It was put under a slow-motion camera, which captured frame by frame as it "exploded into a fireball."

It was enough to confirm that the theory was possible. Now he needed proof. In one of the 911 recordings, he heard a man saying, "we are in the pit." Realizing the caller was in the location where the fire started, he thought he might have found the shooter.

Eventually, he was able to obtain the name and set up a meeting.

"When the individual came in, it was a couple of weeks later. I was still analyzing all this stuff that I collected, trying to figure out 'Okay, what's possible, what's not. How do I rule this out?'"

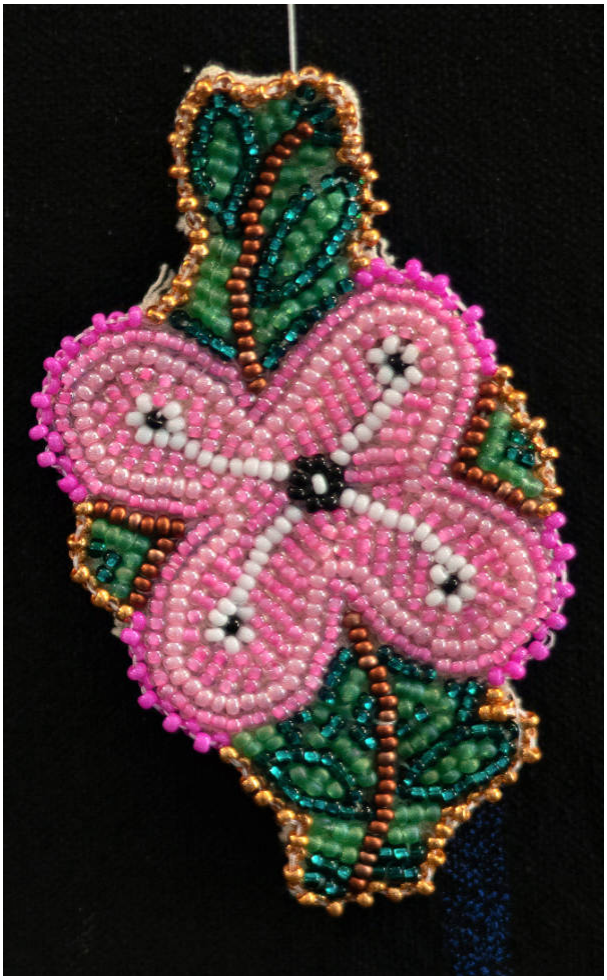
The two individuals from the 911 call admitted that on the day of the fire, they had been practising for hunting season by shooting long distances. They admitted to using Tannerite. The substance didn't explode but made a sizzle, igniting the dry grass uphill.

"By the time they ran down, the fire was already up and into the trees. So, they could not get it. It was that fast," explained Green. "I can't speak on whether or not they were right or wrong by shooting that day, but they did report it and did their best to [call] it right away."

"I got lucky too," said Green. "Because, as a shooter, I would probably shoot from different areas, putting me into positions that you wouldn't normally look at."

Following the scientific method, conducting investigations consistently, along with 911 recordings, ultimately found the cause of the fire.

Superbloom shows what happens after the fire



Superbloom is an art project that was created in response to the wildfires in 2023 across the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. Inspired by the fireweed blooming in Ethel Lake following the fire, community members worked with artists Nicole Schafenacker and Krystle Silverfox (Selkirk First Nation) to create a visual art project to "explore the resilience inherent in the land and in our communities."

Materials in the final project included charcoal from burns, pastels, beadwork, and fish leather. The work was created by many hands and supported by the Dechinta Centre, Yukon Arts Fund and CPAWS Yukon.

Image credits

Haley Ritchie


Feel the Land beneath
soft moss, bare feet
a deep stance, bent knee
through the cool bark of trees

Ted Macdonald and his partner Julia.

Ted and Julia's children.

Finding family balance in wildland fire

How do you balance being there for your friends and family during fire season?

As anyone working in wildland fire knows, it's often the toughest part of the job. When summer starts, friends and family get used to hearing that you're a "solid maybe" for occasions like weddings, birthdays and weekend camping trips.

The summer schedule takes a particularly hard toll on the parents of wildland fire as people with unique job skills balance their wildfire careers and family demands.

Conner Lee, one of the many new parents working for Yukon Wildland Fire Management, said work-life balance has gotten "significantly harder" since becoming a father. The emergency response officer relies on his partner for support and feels guilty when his child is sick and needs extra support that he can't always provide.

"The fire season is a little bittersweet now. I'm still really excited for it, but there's a lot of added stress from having a family at home now. It's a bit more stressful because you know you're going to be away. It's fine when things are going good at home, but when the kid's sick and extra support is needed and you're not able to provide it, you feel, I don't know if guilty is the right word, but like there's just not enough of you to make it all happen, right?" he admits.

Similarly, Ted MacDonald, a fellow emergency response officer with toddlers at home, admits "there's no balance when it's busy." As an air attack officer, MacDonald often needs all his energy and attention focused on work just to function the next day.

Both Lee and MacDonald agree that the hardest part is the missed moments. Lee missed his daughter learning how to walk while he was deployed in Saskatchewan.

"You miss things like this and it's really sad," he admits. "Children are only young once, and it's such an important time."

Lee is already anticipating the moment when it will become even harder, once his daughter is older and understands that the "red bag by the door" signifies his departure for weeks.

Melanie Magnuson, one of the Yukon Duty Officers for the territory, says things don't necessarily get easier as kids get older. She's always aware that work means missing time with her 10-year-old son.

Mike and Ruby

Conner and Alice

Mel and Cody

When things heat up during the summer, all three parents rely on their family members. MacDonald explains that his family usually spends the summers in Toronto, with grandparents. That allows him to focus on work. When his family is in town and he has days off, the emergency response officer dedicates all his time to them.

Magnuson says intentionally scheduling time off is crucial. This year, she took a week off for the first time to attend a hockey tournament, despite the busy fire season. She also takes her son camping on days off to escape household chores and ensure they get quality time together.

Fire Information Officer Mike Fancie agrees, having used the government's parental leave program to step back entirely from work this summer. "Having the support from my workplace to spend quality time as a family means my partner, my daughter and I will all be better prepared for when my job asks more of me in the future," says Fancie.

For MacDonald, the responsibility of being a dad has also made him more aware of the risks of the job.

"My attention to safety has only improved or grown in my mind. Towards everybody on my team, everyone on the ground, and everyone that we interact with, too. At the end of the day, and at the end of the season, we go home happy and healthy," he explains. "It was already a big part of my job, but now I have more people who rely on me."

Finally, after the summer season, winter can represent a change of pace that allows everyone to catch up on lost time.

Lee, who works an eight-month season, can "clock out and not think about work" during his four months off. Magnuson says a more flexible workplace in the winter allows her to spend more time with her family outside of fire season, picking up her son from the bus every day and staying home if he's sick. MacDonald's family often travels internationally together during the winter, compensating for time spent apart.

It's the reality of the job: sacrifice in the summer, recovery in the off-season. Through it all, an ongoing effort to keep work and family in balance.

More than a blend

Kitchen appliance, DJ or firefighting? Mixmaster Kai Widdecke and Airtanker Program Supervisor Chris Boland explain it all.

Mixmaster Gabriella Rayo practices loading an air tanker.

Caleb Skinkle

Mixmasters training to load an Air Tractor AT-802 air tanker.

Manon Touffet

What is a mixmaster's job?

KAI: A mixmaster blends two liquids in the right ratio. As an example, when you buy a bottle of whiskey and it contains two or three different whiskeys, it's actually a blend. Basically, it's two components that you have there, retardant and water. We are controlling that; the mix ratio is constant all the time.

It's also maintenance: being helpful to the pilots, making sure everything is clean, serviceable, and ready. It's ensuring fuel quality for aircraft as well.

For how long have you been a mixmaster? Why did you choose the job?

KAI: When I first applied with Wildland Fire Management to be a mixmaster, I couldn't start on the specific date they wanted it filled. So, I missed the position by two weeks. The job went to another person who was working in logistics at the warehouse, and I ended up filling his vacancy there. I was essentially in a "waiting position" until the mixmaster role became available again. I was aiming for the mixmaster job from the beginning because I always loved being around airplanes; I even have my own.

I've been a mixmaster for eight seasons now!

How do you become a mixmaster?

KAI: Anybody with common sense and a mechanical affinity can do the job! Within two days, you can have your certification, and then it's up to you. Safety is a big factor. While loading, you have to work around spinning propellers. Pretty much anybody who is interested and capable of understanding the procedures can perform the job properly and safely.

Do you know why people call you "mixmasters"?

CHRIS: I think it's because when it started, mixmasters had to mix to then blend it. In the old days, it was a dry powder, and we called them "goopers" instead of mixmasters. Nowadays, they're called "loaders"; the Yukon is the only agency that still calls them mixmasters.

Why is this job important?

KAI: If I'm slacking off and not ensuring the fuel quality, I might be the reason an airtanker or helicopter falls out of the sky. Even traces of water in the fuel system can lead to engine failure. So, I'm basically responsible for the safety of the airplanes and the pilots in them. That's more important than having a 100% correct mix ratio for the retardant. If the mix ratio is a little bit off, it doesn't hurt anybody; it just might not be 100% effective for firefighting. But if the fuel is unclean or contaminated, that's a real life-threatening aspect that lots of people don't really realize.

Kai with an Electra L-188 air tanker.

Kai Widdecke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ADVANCED

2025 Photo contest winner

Wildland Fire Management's photo contest rewards fire crews for images that shine a light on their hard work out of the public eye.

Every month, one of the firefighters who sends photos to the Fire Information team is chosen at random to win a prize. At the end of the season, the best overall photo is immortalized on the next year's WFM wall calendar and the winner receives a custom pocket tool.

This year's overall first prize went to Phoenix Skailes for his image of a member of Tombstone crew working Dawson's first fire of the summer near Jeckell Creek.

If you're a Yukon wildland firefighter or an imported resource working here, enter the contest by emailing your entries to yukonfireinfo@yukon.ca.

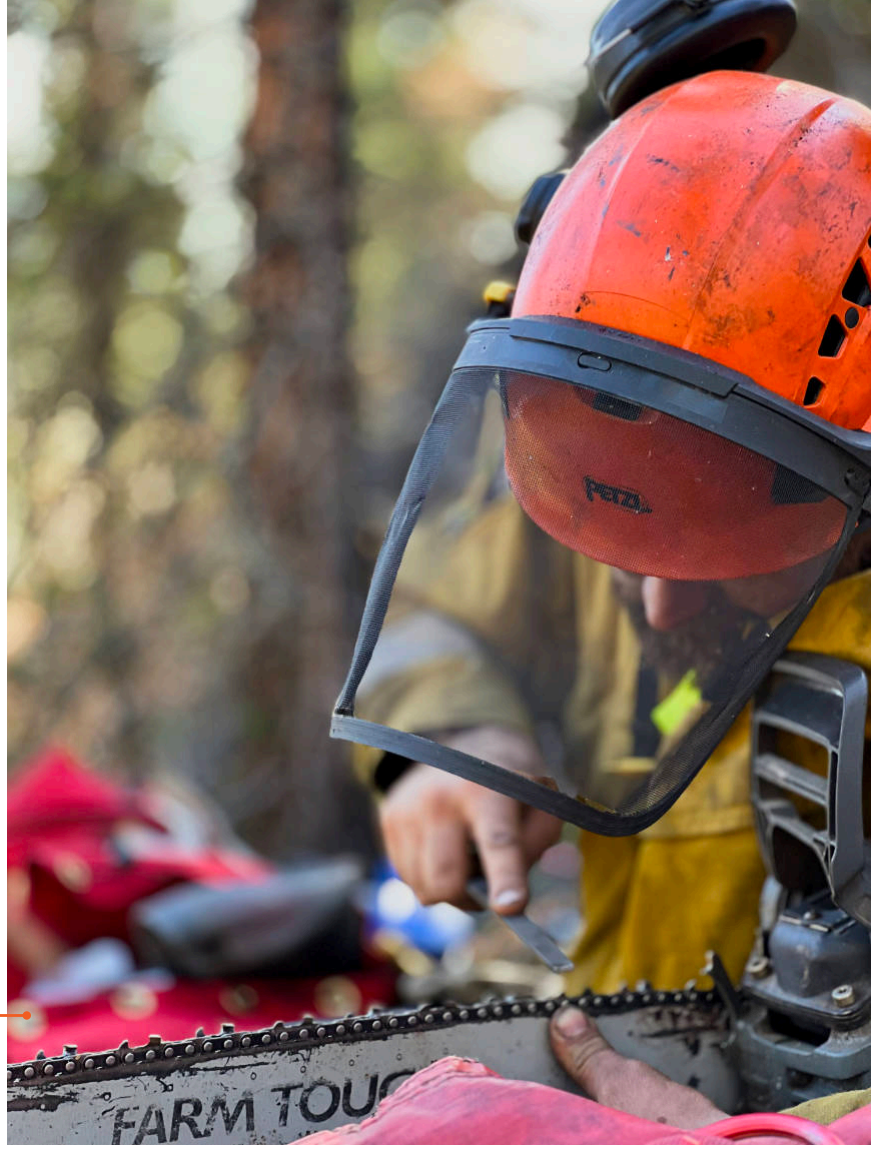
Monthly Winners

May winner
Adam McDonald - “Boyle Barracks Crew Member Training camp”

Crew member trainees head out at the beginning of the season.

August winner
Tanner Borsa - “Haines Junction and chainsaws”

A firefighter uses a chainsaw to remove a hazard.



June winner
Chris Field-Leal -
“Playing with fire”

A Terra Torch is tested before being put to use at a controlled burn.

July winner
Haitch Hayes -
“Chainsaw work”

A firefighter works on their chainsaw.

The culture camp at Fire Lake

Teresa Samson and Melody Hutton photographed in the gazebo at the culture camp.

Haley Ritchie

A sign outside the Na-Cho Nyak Dun culture camp near Ethel Lake.

Haley Ritchie

It was a frightening sight – wildfire cresting over the mountain at night, visible from the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun First Nation culture camp at the end of the fireweed-covered Ethel Lake Road.

But heritage manager Teresa Samson felt a little better knowing they had already spent the past two years FireSmarting the camp in case a wildfire approached.

"It got pretty scary there for a bit, and everybody was watching the fire press the mountain top. It was getting very close," she said. "But when Wildland Fire came out, they were really impressed with the fact that we had already done a lot of FireSmarting in and around camp," she explained.

In 2023, a different fire threatened the area, prompting the First Nation to consider what actions they could take to proactively protect the outpost. They worked with Wildland Fire Management's Dave Trudeau to identify areas that could be improved.

"Dave gave us some really good training. We created a fire maintenance plan. It was really helpful information," said Samson.

There were a lot of reasons to protect the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun culture camp.

Tekwänt'e Män is the Northern Tutchone name for Ethel Lake. It means "fire lake." Despite the past few years of wildfires near the area, the name refers to night fishing by firelight, rather than frequent forest fires.

The camp is a special place with history going back before memory. Elders were born along its shoreline, and generations of youth have learned language, harvesting skills and traditions there.

The site includes bunkies, a kitchen, gathering spaces and a glassed-in gazebo for meetings. Each year, it hosts youth camps, wellness programs and Elders' gatherings.

"We talk about the importance of passing on our knowledge, and it's particularly when we're at Youth Camp, we always have Elders with us. We're teaching the youth how to cut fish and we're teaching them how to cut moose and caribou, how to harvest medicines, and then we incorporate language into a lot of things. Our new road signs are welcoming you in our language," explains Samson. "It's a very busy place. Everybody wants to come and spend time out here."

After the 2023 fire, the First Nation wanted to better protect the camp from future wildfires. They found dense, flammable spruce trees too close to buildings and older structures that were vulnerable to embers. A contractor was hired to thin trees, clear vegetation and upgrade buildings with more fire-resistant materials.

Two years later in June 2025, lightning caused the Francis Plateau fire (MA-019) in June, which burned up to 600 metres of the camp.

Because the work had already been done, firefighters could move in quickly – setting up sprinklers, hose lays and pumps. The First Nation allowed the camp to be used as a base for helicopters and ground crews to work the fire in the hills above.

Fortunately, the flames never reached the site.

The FireSmart work didn't have to be tested – but it made a difference. The fire quieted in time to host summer Youth Camp, ensuring traditions continue beside Tekwänt'e Män.

A sprinkler set up to protect the Na-Cho Nyak Dun culture camp from a wildfire above Ethel Lake.

Haley Ritchie

Faces of WFM

Phoenix Skailes poses in front of a controlled burn.

Adam McDonald

Frances 3 and Frances 4 enjoying their time in Dawson.

Adam McDonald

Guy Couture with BC firefighters.

Oliver Flegel

Milada and Jeff flex their fire muscles.

Milada Pardovicova and Jeff Melnychuk

Alsek crew and Frances crew in Saskatchewan in August.

Adam McDonald

Iron Rust and Firestone firefighters keeping a close eye on the border.

Darin Arthurs

“Is that smoke?” –
No, that’s just a cloud.

Manon Touffet

Firefighters on high alert wait for their transportation.

Manon Touffet

Manon Touffet and Queenie Lu after completing WFX-Fit.

Tyson Cole

This summer marked the end of meteorologist Mike Smith's (second from left) long tenure with Wildland Fire Management. He is not one for long goodbyes, but we hope one day that he will read this and know that his talents are missed.

Jessica Mack

Crews going to Saskatchewan in June.

Manon Touffet

Staff performing a reconnaissance flight.

Manon Touffet

Being a firefighter also means knowing how to fix ignition machines.

Manon Touffet

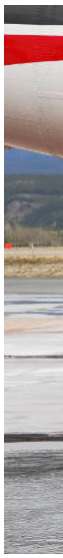
Fire Information Officer Haley Ritchie on assignment at a prescribed fire.

Manon Touffet

Oliver Flegel

Hyland crew during a break in operations.

Jack Skinkle



Firefighters returning to base after a long day on the fireline.

John McInnes

Shadhala crew on operations.

Haitch Hayes

Laurie Fahr, Manon Touffet and Kendra Potvin while working for the Smith Complex.

Manon Touffet

Yukon's mixmasters during a training day.

Manon Touffet

By late June, Dawson's morning briefings take on a life of their own.

Dawson firefighters on lunch break at the Klondike Fire Centre.

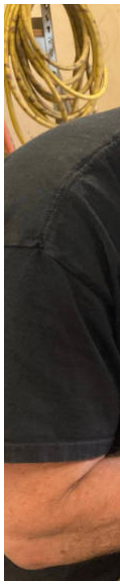
Ted MacDonald

Taiga and Eagle crews.

Oliver Flegel

Pilots enjoying some music at the Dawson air tanker base.

Ted MacDonald



Mixmaster Bruce Murray fixing the Green Dragon Ignition machine by taking apart an old radio with Conair Engineer Nick Loo.

Ted MacDonald

Haley Ritchie and Devin Bailey after a press conference in Whitehorse.

Manon Touffet

Klondike Fire Centre staff debriefing a busy operations day in the duty room.

Ted MacDonald

Tombstone crew on base.

Jessica Mack

From concrete to the canopy

What's the difference between structural and wildland firefighters?

The public doesn't always realize that wildland firefighters and structural firefighters have very different jobs.

While structural firefighters manage fires involving buildings and perform rescue operations, wildland firefighters are responsible for fires that burn in natural areas. Structural firefighters are tasked with a wide range of public emergencies, including traffic incidents and medical assistance. They also work year-round, while wildland firefighters usually work seasonally when wildfires are most common.

In Canada, structural firefighter standards are governed by the NFPA (National Fire Protection Association), while CIFFC (Canadian Interagency Fire Centre) coordinates standards for wildland firefighters.

Equipment

Structural firefighters wear heavier personal protection equipment, with gear weight ranging from 60 to 100 pounds. They use what's called an SCBA (self-contained breathing apparatus) to carry their own air supply to help them breathe while fighting fire inside burning buildings.

Wildland firefighters hike into remote areas, making SCBA impossible to use, but they still have to be concerned about smoke inhalation. In places like British Columbia, crews have access to respirators that will reduce particulate matter exposure. That said, many places, including the Yukon, provide firefighters with specialized cloth masks to cover their faces.

Water use

Both types of firefighters use pumps to move water. In the Boreal forest, it can be argued that water movement is the most important critical wildland fire tactic at our disposal. Structural pumps are larger and move a higher volume of water. In town, they can draw from an almost unlimited water supply from fire hydrants. Wildfire pumps are smaller but use higher pressure. This difference moves the water further in a steadier stream so it can cut through duff and mineral soil to cool off hot roots and other forest debris. Since water supplies can be limited, being water efficient and identifying natural sources can make all the difference.

Vehicles

Structural firefighting uses big fire engines called pumpers and tenders. Pumpers are the primary attack vehicle with hoses that go from the truck to the nozzle that directly fights the fire. Tenders are support trucks that have a larger tank and help pumpers by supplying more water. While wildland fire crews also use fire engines, they tend to be more versatile vehicles suitable for rugged environments. Due to the high consequence of wildland-urban interface fires in the Whitehorse area, Wildland Fire Management does have a fire engine based at the Southern Lakes Fire Centre... but most wildfire vehicles are upgraded 4x4 trucks. Wildland also uses aircraft like helicopters and planes.

Ultimately, the two types of firefighting are very different but have the same goal: get wet stuff on the hot stuff. When wildfires threaten towns or communities, the teams come together, using both tactics and years of co-training to keep people safe.

Opposite page

Wildland Fire and Whitehorse Fire Department staff supervise a prescribed burn on Long Lake Road.

Julia Duchesne

Below

Ember Academy participants train wearing the SCBA that people usually associate with front-line firefighting.

Haley Ritchie

A firefighter carries a drip torch at a prescribed fire.

Manon Touffet

Yukon