



Alberta Budget cuts to Wildfire Management put business and people at risk

Issue

The recent and ongoing trend of warm and dry weather has significantly increased the risk of wildfires in Alberta and resulted in devastating losses to Alberta communities. In Budget 2016, the provincial government made significant cuts to the wildfire management budget. This attempt to reduce government expenditures in Budget 2016 has reduced the contract for air tanker services, damaging the Alberta aerospace industry, and putting the safety and livelihood of Albertans at risk.

Background

The budget cuts to wildfire management has resulted in the contracts for Alberta air tanker services reduced from 123 days to 93 days, ending them on August 16th. While the government will obviously pay to fight the fires after the 16th of August, the budget reduction eliminates the guarantee that the air tanker companies will keep their services and operations in Alberta after the 16th of August as they look for contracts elsewhere. This potentially results in businesses leaving the area, as well as extra costs and time delays for other air tanker companies to come to Alberta from afar.

The reduced budget for wildfire management is poor budgeting, being totally misleading to the true cost. For wildfire management the province paid \$225 million in 2014-2015, \$470 million in 2015-2016, and yet only estimated \$86 million for 2016-2017 despite it being a “high-risk” year.

There have been an average of nearly 1500 wildfires a year between 2005 and 2014, and with the frequency of extreme warm summer temperatures (exceeding 30°C) expected to increase, the risk of wildfires only increases.¹² In August of 2015, 7 of Alberta’s 8 air tanker groups were on high alert (meaning there were active wildfires burning). In 2014, 5 of the air tanker groups were on high alert.³ This combined information leads one to question the wisdom of reducing the wildfire management budget and eliminating the guarantee that the air tanker groups will be available after August 16th.

Along with providing invaluable fire protection services, the ongoing operations and maintenance of Alberta-based air tanker companies provide significant economic contribution to the economy of

¹<http://wildfire.alberta.ca/wildfire-maps/historical-wildfire-information/documents/WildfiresByYear-2005-14-Apr14-2015.pdf>

²<http://www.nrcan.gc.ca/environment/resources/publications/impacts-adaptation/reports/assessments/2008/ch2/10321>

³ <https://issuu.com/blackpress/docs/i20160419224237185/1>

Alberta. Air tanker companies employ hundreds of mostly high skilled, highly paid people, many of whom do much more than provide fire protection services. An example is Air Spray, a company that employs as many as 150 pilots, aircraft maintenance engineers, and other technical staff to keep the aircraft operational throughout the fire season. Air Spray spends 8 months preparing their fleet ahead of each fire season and provides maintenance, training, and parts fabrication services for other aerospace operators, all of which is put at risk of leaving the province if the air tanker companies receive a more lucrative contract outside of Alberta.⁴ This will export jobs out of Alberta, when we should be supporting Alberta workers. It is not reasonable for the Government to expect companies such as Air Spray to invest in their business, only to be granted a contract that ends August 16.

While we applaud the government for looking for savings in the budget, we feel the cuts to Wildfire Management put the province at far too great of a risk to be worthwhile.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends that the Government of Alberta:

1. Reinstate the budget for wildfire management, including a guarantee for Alberta-based air tanker services and other businesses providing wildfire management services for 123 days.
2. Reinstate the budget allocation for Fire Smart to 2015 levels.

⁴ <http://www.airspray.com/>