



Burnt Out

**A Workers'
Perspective from
Manitoba's 2025
Wildfire Season**

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A Workers' Perspective from Manitoba's 2025 Wildfire Season

Manitoba's 2025 wildfire season was unprecedented. Raging fires left a path of destruction and devastation across the Province as entire cities and towns were evacuated, homes and cottages were levelled, and vast natural areas were scorched. Daily news and social media vividly revealed the first-hand experience of many Manitobans who were impacted. Meanwhile, hundreds of MGEU members from the Wildfire Service stepped up to fight fires, emergency management personnel coordinated mass evacuations, and hundreds more were reassigned from their daily work across Government to provide disaster response to their fellow Manitobans. Without the courageous efforts of the thousands of public workers, the devastation could have been much worse. With more staff, more resources, better training and coordination, Manitoba's response to the wildfires would have been improved and more damage would have been mitigated.

"Across Manitoba, workers stepped up with courage and self-sacrifice in the face of devastating fires and harsh working conditions. I heard from many members, 'we have good people, there just aren't enough of us'. All these folks are asking for are the resources to do their job."

Kyle Ross, MGEU President

"Across Manitoba, workers stepped up with courage and self-sacrifice in the face of devastating fires and harsh working conditions, said MGEU President Kyle Ross. "I heard from many members, 'we have good people, there just aren't enough of us.' All these folks are asking for are the resources to do their job."

This report provides an overview of the 2025 wildfire season from the perspective of the workers who support and deliver the province's wildfire response and provides recommendations and considerations to improve the service into the future.

The Premier praised wildfire personnel by inducting them into the Order of the Buffalo Hunt stating, "From the first sparks to the continuing fight against wildfires, these Manitoba heroes worked around the clock to protect communities, homes and lives. I want to thank every firefighter, every emergency worker, and every volunteer who stood on the front lines and behind the scenes. Manitobans can take pride in knowing when disaster strikes, we have people of extraordinary skill and heart answering the call." ⁱ

As the Province prepares for a review of the 2025 fire season, we call on the Premier and his Government to invite the workers' perspective into the conversation of what worked, what did not work, and how to improve for next fire season.

The information and recommendations in the report are drawn from MGEU member feedback learned during a debrief session, tours of fire bases in Northern Manitoba, and members reaching out to the union to share their personal experiences. The report contains core areas of action including recommendations to: fix the staffing crisis, invest in staff training and safety, review classifications and compensation, invest in modern and appropriate equipment, invest in tactical aviation resources, and modernize systems and processes.

OVERVIEW

The 2025 fire season required a large-scale response from different orders of government from several jurisdictions, multiple organizations and many departments. Manitoba's Wildfire Service is the province's lead agency for wildfire protection with a mandate is to protect life, property, and natural resources, and to deploy resources where values at risk are highest. Working in coordination with the Emergency Measures Organization (EMO), the Wildfire Service and many other staff from across the Provincial Government managed both the wildfire response and the evacuation of over 32,000 Manitobans from across the province. The general themes of short staffing, under-resourcing, and the need for better training and preparation were heard broadly throughout the consultation process.

MGEU members in the Wildfire Service who raised their hands to connect and share their experiences from the 2025 fire season were asked what their top priority was to improve wildfire response in the future. From the Fire Rangers on the frontlines to those behind the scenes providing logistical and planning support came a unanimous and urgent call for more staffing resources. One member of the Wildfire Service summarized the staffing issues by saying, "Across all positions here, we're short staffed... we just don't have the capacity here in Manitoba." Another noted, "you're just hanging on by the skin of your teeth..."

A recent CBC report highlighted the staffing issues in the Wildfire Service reporting that, "When wildfires began rapidly spreading across Manitoba in May — the start of a fire season that forced 32,000 out of their homes — the province was short dozens (64) of fire rangers, and 25 per cent of its wildfire division positions were vacant..."ⁱⁱ

The consequence of short staffing is that there are not enough crews to attack and manage small fires before they become large fires that require exponentially more resources and threaten communities and vast natural areas. Further,

the combination of severe wildfires and an acute staffing shortage hampers the ability to attack fires early, threatening large stands of forest and valuable timber that sustains several large employers in the province, which support significant employment in local economies.



"Across all positions here, we're short staffed... we just don't have the capacity here in Manitoba"

Wildfire Service Member

"When wildfires began rapidly spreading across Manitoba in May — the start of a fire season that forced 32,000 out of their homes — the province was short dozens of fire rangers, and 25 per cent of its wildfire division positions were vacant..."

CBC Manitoba

THE FRONT LINES OF WILDFIRE RESPONSE

Fire Rangers in the Wildfire Service work under extreme conditions to protect Manitoba's natural areas during the fire season. These frontline first responders fight wildfires on the ground in Initial Attack (IA) crews with 5-6 Crew Members (FR2) led by a Crew Leader (FR3). The Helitac Officers (FR4) lead operations on the Fire Base, directing wildfire response, and supporting deployments provincially and nationally.

IA crews "line camp" when responding to remote access fires, which means they sleep in the forest in tents, cooking from a camp stove, up to 24 days at a time. They spend their entire summers protecting our forests and natural resources doing an extremely physical and dangerous job. They are a group that is employed on a seasonal basis, working long hours, usually in remote areas with no services or amenities. In the fall, they are laid off, and many return to their homes that are far from their seasonal headquartered work locations.

Climate change is increasing the number of fires and length of the fire season, which is adding additional strain on these services. Experts warn that "zombie fires" are smouldering beneath the surface well into the winter months and are at high risk of flaring up as soon as the weather warms up.ⁱⁱⁱ Retaining a 12-month crew of Fire Rangers would ensure they would be available to manage these fires and work in and around communities to add protection in advance of the 2026 season.

The seasonal nature of the Fire Ranger positions and extreme working conditions make retaining these critical personnel more difficult. Due to very low wages and a competitive labour market, there are extremely high turnover rates and a lack of experience on the ground. The declining level of experience have impacts on worker safety, stress on the job, and increase training costs for the employer. One member noted that, "Our best tool in our pocket is experienced, capable personnel... It's a very limited tool."

Recruitment and retention issues in the Wildfire Service have led to more inexperienced crews and crew leaders at a time when we are heading into an era of the more extreme fire weather.

The consequences of continuing down this path may mean the loss of infrastructure, natural spaces, communities, natural resources, lives and livelihoods of the public, and firefighter lives.

These operations are supported by a group of members who perform many different duties in the Wildfire Service ranging from training, logistics, cooking, procuring supplies and external services, processing invoices and payments, manage and direct colleagues, among many other everyday responsibilities.

Across the civil service, members shared concerns that chronic short staffing, insufficient training and unsustainable workloads are pushing them to the brink. The absence of a long-term workforce plan and sustained resources to hire and train workers in the Public Service will continue to reduce Manitoba's capacity to respond to large-scale natural disasters.

These findings are not surprising, many members and leaders in the public service predicted that services and emergency response would suffer as a direct result of budget and staffing cuts. In 2020, the former Director of the EMO, wrote: "The taxpaying public has the right to expect a robust response when emergencies occur. When governments hack and slash resources away, there is nobody and nothing left when the crisis hits."^{iv}

EVACUATIONS & SUPPORT SERVICES

While there is an emphasis on properly resourcing the Wildfire Service, it is important to mention that many staff from several Departments were redeployed to coordinate a wide variety of operations including evacuation logistics of setting up centres to receive evacuees, finding places for evacuees to stay, and other duties that were assigned.

Displaced Manitobans not only required safe and comfortable facilities, but also health and social services to manage the turmoil and upheaval they faced. Children in care required placements and supervision in a

child welfare system that is already overburdened and under-staffed. After returning to their primary role in the public service, members reported high levels of burnout amongst staff who were reassigned to wildfire response.

For those staff from the civil service who were reassigned to other roles, especially those moving into temporary front-line positions at congregate shelters and hotels, members reported feeling insufficiently prepared and trained for the work. They shared numerous issues with health and safety as well as concerns about lack of mental health supports, as they were dealing with vicarious trauma while also experiencing trauma.

Inmates in correctional facilities in The Pas had to be evacuated and transported to other centres where inmates are already triple-bunked and Correctional Officers (COs) are working short. As Milner Ridge was threatened by fire, it became clear how vulnerable COs, inmates, and the facility are.

The risks of wildfires on corrections and family services are but two examples of the broad impact wildfires had on Manitobans and those who provide vital public services. We know that members working in communities and service areas around the province contributed to efforts in many ways.

It is time for government to staff up and add resources urgently as winter storms, floods, wildfires, and other natural disasters are becoming the norm, not the exception. The commitment of public workers prevented the 2025 fire season from becoming far more devastating, yet with adequate staffing and resources, the outcomes could have been significantly improved.

A STAFFING CRISIS

Severe staffing shortages, high-turnover and loss of experienced staff have left crews stretched beyond safe limits. Many members noted there are vacancies across the program, “Our staffing levels are (19)70s, (19)80s levels — not current.” This staffing shortage forces workers into constant double and triple-duty and left bases insufficiently resourced, with members describing the experience as “It’s too much double duty... The Swiss cheese is lining up here,” when fire activity increased.

Another major risk members warned of was the loss of experienced personnel: “our best tool in our pocket is experienced, capable personnel... it’s a very limited tool”.

As turnover continues, inexperienced workers were often pushed into roles beyond their readiness, creating additional safety concerns and operational strain.

One participant summarized the impact: “A lot of people are doing roles they aren’t trained for because there is no one else.” Taken together, members made it clear that without addressing staffing gaps and rebuilding an experienced workforce, Manitoba’s wildfire response capacity will continue to erode. A measure to improve retention would be to provide advance notice outlining the length of season in early spring to allow for planning. For example, several extensions were offered to members late in the season after many had already made plans to start another job. Establishing longer term commitments with advance notice would entice more members to return

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Wildfire Service Worker

“It’s too much double duty... The Swiss cheese is lining up here.”

Wildfire Service Worker

the following year. A member suggested a detailed plan would improve the likelihood of retaining experienced staff or, “A road map for where this program’s going... how are we going to fill the vacancies?”

For members working in other areas of the civil service, the broader civil service staffing crisis meant they were being pulled from one job, where they had insufficient staff, to do another, leaving the work with no one to do it. The work they were reassigned to do could also be traumatic, which took a toll on members mental health, leading to further burnout. One member noted, “we need to take better care of our staff.”

RECOMMENDATIONS: FIX THE PUBLIC SECTOR STAFFING CRISIS

- Post and fill vacant positions across the Wildfire Service.
- Fill every budgeted seasonal position.
- Create full-time 12-month Fire Ranger positions to improve year-round protection.
- Start seasonal crews in March to allow proper training and preseason preparation.
- Provide season length commitments by early spring.
- Establish a mandatory winter posting timelines for all key roles.
- Create a province-wide staffing surge plan to reduce reliance on double-duty.
- Reintroduce hybrid/WFH options for off-season roles where appropriate.
- Implement a Northern Retention Allowance aligned with other civil service roles.
- Develop a leadership progression pathway to rebuild experience depth.
- Publish a 5-year wildfire workforce and readiness plan.

TRAINING, QUALIFICATIONS & SAFETY

Across the civil service, members emphasized that training is well short of what frontline and supervisor roles require. For the Wildfire Service, this is especially true given the complexity of modern fires. For other areas, such as supporting evacuees, members also reported not being provided appropriate training for the work they were doing.

In the Wildfire Service, members described the lack of mentorship opportunities, limited time for pre-season instruction and earlier fire starts impacted appropriate training. One member explained that “we didn’t get enough training... the people that run your training are often the people that are running the fires too.”

“We got lucky this year... people start getting tired... it’s just a matter of time before something terrible happens.”

Wildfire Service Worker

Much like challenges with understaffing, when it comes to training, members expressed concerns that staff were being moved into leadership roles because there was no one else. Safety risks were repeatedly raised, specifically around crews lacking Wilderness First Aid, new hires entering dangerous conditions without sufficient skill, and the loss of experience across the workforce. As one participant summarized, current conditions mean “We got lucky this year... people start getting tired... it’s just a matter of time before something terrible happens.”

RECOMMENDATIONS: INVEST IN STAFF TRAINING AND SAFETY

- Introduce a structured preseason training period.
- Reinstate a formal mentorship/shadowing system for leadership development.
- Make Wilderness First Aid mandatory for all remote-deployed staff.
- Provide Air Ops/Airspace training to all Incident Management Teams (IMT) and incoming support teams.
- Implement mandatory After-Action Reviews for all aviation close calls.
- Provide appropriate training for staff who are reassigned to support wildfire and evacuation efforts.

COMPENSATION & JOB CLASSIFICATIONS

Members identified concerns with outdated job classifications that no longer reflect the details, risk and complexity of the work being done. Many noted that positions existed across classifications but there was no dedicated wildfire stream. As one participant stated, “we’re not all in fire classifications, even though we’re in operational fire positions... these classifications are just fantasy”.

Members also described wage compression, where there was an increase in responsibility but not a meaningful pay increase. One member shared that moving to a more senior role would have included “not even a dollar an hour raise” despite major increases in responsibility. Others highlighted the lack of premium overtime and the inequity created when “people are doing the same job but not getting the same pay” on Incident Management Teams (IMTs). These issues, combined with the absence of a clear career pathway, were repeatedly tied to poor retention: “There’s no reason for someone to take that position... it’s a very large jump in responsibility.” Several members noted that premiums and allowances have failed to keep up with the rising costs, reporting that, “I’m losing money every day just eating... you’re getting nine bucks for breakfast, you’re usually paying 15,” and “with groceries cost now... you’re usually taking a loss.”, while another noted that “you’re making technically less money when you’re camping in the bush... only three bucks a night.”

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Wildfire Service Worker

RECOMMENDATIONS: REVIEW CLASSIFICATION AND COMPENSATION

- Strike a wildfire specific union-management classification review committee.
- Negotiate a premium OT MOU covering all wildfire-related duties and deployments.
- Update per diem rates to reflect current food and travel costs.
- Introduce enhanced line-camping premium.

OPERATIONS & EQUIPMENT

Across all regions, members reported everything from insufficient, poor-quality, or unsafe equipment from Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to failing pumps, which limited their ability to do their job safely. Several described a widening gap between what crews need and what is supplied.

One worker explained that in some northern bases, staff wore torn Nomex and did not have access to appropriate sizes of clothing: “You don’t want to step in a pile of ash and get hot ash up your legs because your pants are ripped.” These challenges were not limited to PPE Crews also pointed to deteriorating camp gear: “we gave out \$40 Canadian Tire mattresses... they popped just by looking at them.”

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Wildfire Service Worker

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Wildfire Service Worker

Refurbished gear was described as unreliable and at times dangerous, including pumps tagged as ready that arrived non-functional. Members stated that poor equipment puts both operations and lives at risk: “IA crews need functional, well-maintained equipment... it can be life or death.”

RECOMMENDATIONS: INVEST IN MODERN AND APPROPRIATE EQUIPMENT

- Prioritize northern PPE restocking and size availability.
- Replace aging camp gear with quality equipment.
- Implement a frontline-first gear allocation model for IA crews.
- Develop a standardized QC checklist with sign-off accountability.
- Introduce preseason equipment readiness audits for each base.

AVIATION & TACTICAL RESOURCES

Aviation staff described critical shortages of trained personnel, aircraft, and airspace management capacity. This season, Manitoba had only four air attack officers, well below the staffing needed for three tanker groups. As one member shared, “if you’re sick, you kind of have to work... there’s nobody to replace us” and “It was non-stop... as soon as you’re off the phone, you’re getting dispatched again.”

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Wildfire Service Worker

Additionally, the province does not have a trainee program underway despite the four-year certification timeline and imminent retirements. Another member warned, “we may not have a program” unless trainees are hired immediately. Members also pointed out that bases with multiple crews were given only one helicopter, severely limiting operational capacity. Members repeatedly described “near-miss” aviation safety issues tied to fatigue, inexperience, and demands that exceeded available staffing reporting that it was “a recipe for disaster... we got lucky this year.”

RECOMMENDATIONS: RECRUIT AND TRAIN AVIATION PERSONNEL AND INVEST IN TACTICAL RESOURCES

- Add a second helicopter at major IA bases.
- Re-establish Single Engine Air Tanker retardant capability for rapid containment.
- Create standard airspace coordination protocols for all jurisdictions.
- Require Aviation After-Action Reviews for any airspace concern.
- Expand Air Attack Coordinator staffing to reduce fatigue load.

ADMINISTRATIVE & FINANCE SYSTEMS

Administrative staff described systemic delays, outdated processes, and major workload barriers due to archaic financial and HR systems. Members reported persistent backlogs, months-late payments, and inefficient workflows that slowed operations. One member described the frustration, “it was hiccups after hiccups... we’re still paying invoices, and this shouldn’t be the case” and others noted that “Our financial processes for purchasing, procurement, bill paying are archaic and they really need to change.”

“The way we order resources is still done over fax... it creates massive delays”.

Wildfire Service Worker

Members explained that critical ordering and tracking processes still run through fax machines, creating opportunities for lost information, redundant data entry, and operational bottlenecks. “The way we order resources is still done over fax... it creates massive delays,” said one worker.

Administrative bottlenecks worsened when managers were deployed, and outdated signing authority rules and P-card limitations slowed urgent procurement. Members described the system bluntly as archaic, inconsistent, and unfit for modern wildfire response stating that “Delegated signing authority... hasn't been updated since the 90s.” and “You can't use your purchase card in half the places you need to.”

RECOMMENDATIONS: MODERNIZE SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

- Replace or modernize Shared Services finance systems.
- Expand P-card permissions for on-the-road operational needs.
- Update delegated signing authority to meet operational demands.
- Add dedicated admin/finance staff embedded with wildfire operations.
- Develop rapid procurement processes for emergency response.

CONCLUSION

The risk to life, property, and natural areas is rapidly increasing as extreme wildfires become more frequent and dangerous in Manitoba. Meanwhile, personnel and operational systems to fight wildfires are inadequate because of recruitment and retention issues across the public sector, which are felt acutely in the Wildfire Service. The 2025 fire season was not an outlier, but the new normal as the impacts of climate continue to wreak havoc on communities and natural areas. A robust disaster preparedness plan must include more staff, training, and equipment to address these growing risks. We urge decision-makers in the province to engage members on the frontlines who bring their expertise and a deep dedication to their roles across the public service.

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