

# 2023 Wildfire Season Survey Briefing

The 2023 wildfire season was the worst on record for Alberta and conditions are likely to be similar in the coming years. The RMA sees immense value in bringing together impacted members to discuss their experiences, challenges, victories, and lessons learned from the past to better prepare for the future.

Throughout December 2023 and January 2024, the RMA surveyed members to gather information about rural municipalities' experiences with the 2023 wildfire season. The information gathered from the 2023 wildfire survey, which was completed by 39 RMA member municipalities, will help determine how RMA can best directly support members in building wildfire capacity and sharing best practices. It will also be used to advocate to the Government of Alberta for specific improvements to their mitigation, planning, response, and recovery approaches moving forward.

The following briefing will share an overview of the common themes and experiences faced by rural municipalities across the province during the 2023 wildfire season. Please note that this survey closed on January 19, 2024, so some statistics represented may have changed, especially those related to Disaster Recovery Program (DRP) funding.

## Survey Results and Overview

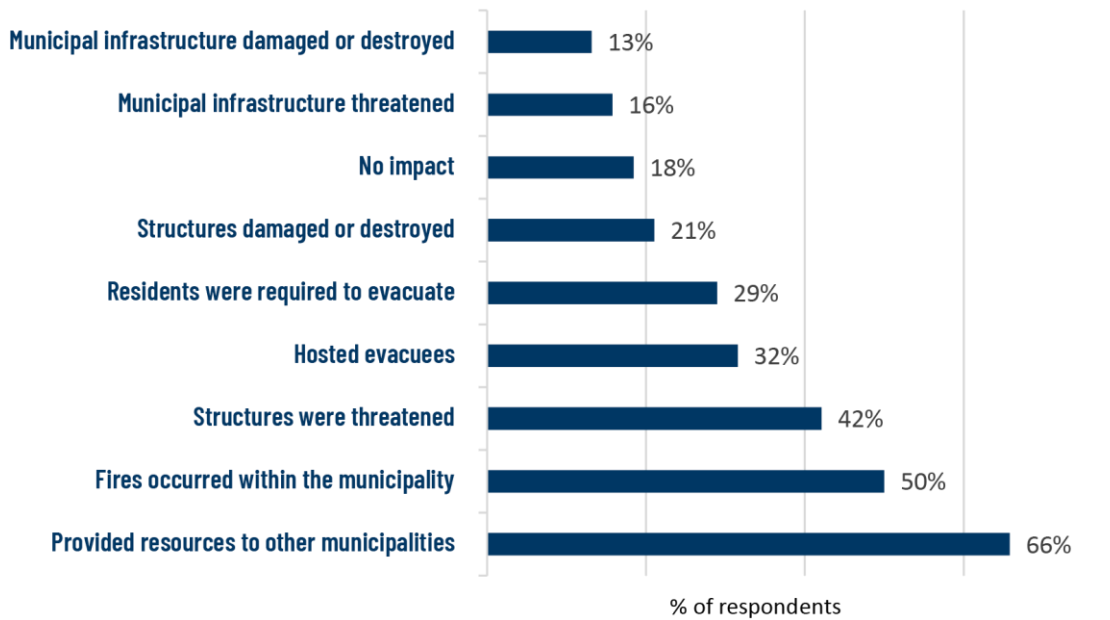
- ◆ 38 of 69 (57%) of RMA members completed this survey.
- ◆ The average estimated costs incurred by damages and recovery efforts from the 2023 wildfire season across all respondents is \$2,709,244.41.
- ◆ Requests for provincial support through the Disaster Recovery Program (DRP) from survey respondents totalled over \$60 million.
- ◆ Nearly half (45%) of the municipalities that applied for funding from the DRP have not received any of the amount requested.
- ◆ Among the municipalities that have received funding, only two have received more than half of the requested amount to this point. No municipality has received the full amount requested.
- ◆ Half of the municipalities that requested DRP funding have not yet received a timeline or communication regarding the disbursement of funding.
- ◆ The total amount of DRP funding received by municipalities who made requests represents just 21% of the total estimated incurred costs of the 2023 wildfire season.
- ◆ Nearly half of those who responded (48%) indicated that their municipality did not have access to adequate provincial wildland firefighter equipment or capacity.
- ◆ Three-quarters of respondents reported effective or somewhat effective support from neighbouring municipalities during the 2023 wildfire season.

## Impact to Municipalities and Funding Allocations

While impacts varied, few municipalities were unaffected by wildfires in 2023.

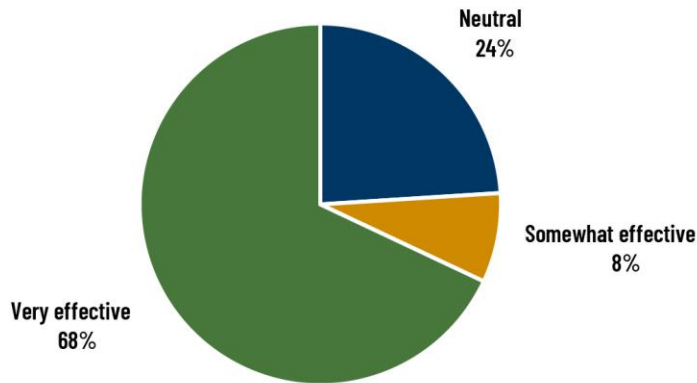
As demonstrated in the chart below, while impacts to municipalities varied, nearly all respondents were impacted by wildfires in some way in 2023, as only 18% of respondents indicated no impact.

**Describe how your municipality was impacted by the 2023 provincewide wildfire outbreak (select all that apply)**



66% of respondents reported that they provided resources to neighbouring municipalities, which was the most prominent way that municipalities were impacted in the 2023 wildfire season. This finding speaks to the importance of inter-municipal collaboration and communication and may act as a guide for advocacy efforts and funding proposals.

**Rate the support your municipality received from neighbouring municipalities throughout wildfire season**



It is also worth noting how many municipalities were impacted in multiple ways by the 2023 wildfire season. Approximately one-third of municipalities were impacted in four or more ways by wildfire events last year. This suggests that during wildfire events, many municipalities are reacting to multiple risks or needs at once, including direct fire fighting, evacuations,

communications, and supporting neighbours. The multi-faceted impacts of wildfires are likely to stretch municipal resources and capacity and require leaders to make complex decisions about resource allocation.

**If your municipality was impacted by wildfires in any way in 2023, provide an estimate of the total costs incurred related to wildfire response and recovery.**

Although the average estimated incurred cost to municipalities by the 2023 wildfire season varied drastically between municipalities, a total of \$78,568,088 was incurred across all municipalities surveyed at an average cost of \$2,709,244.41 for the 2023 wildfire season.

**\$30,000,000**

Maximum incurred cost

**\$78,568,088**

Total incurred cost

**\$2,709,244**

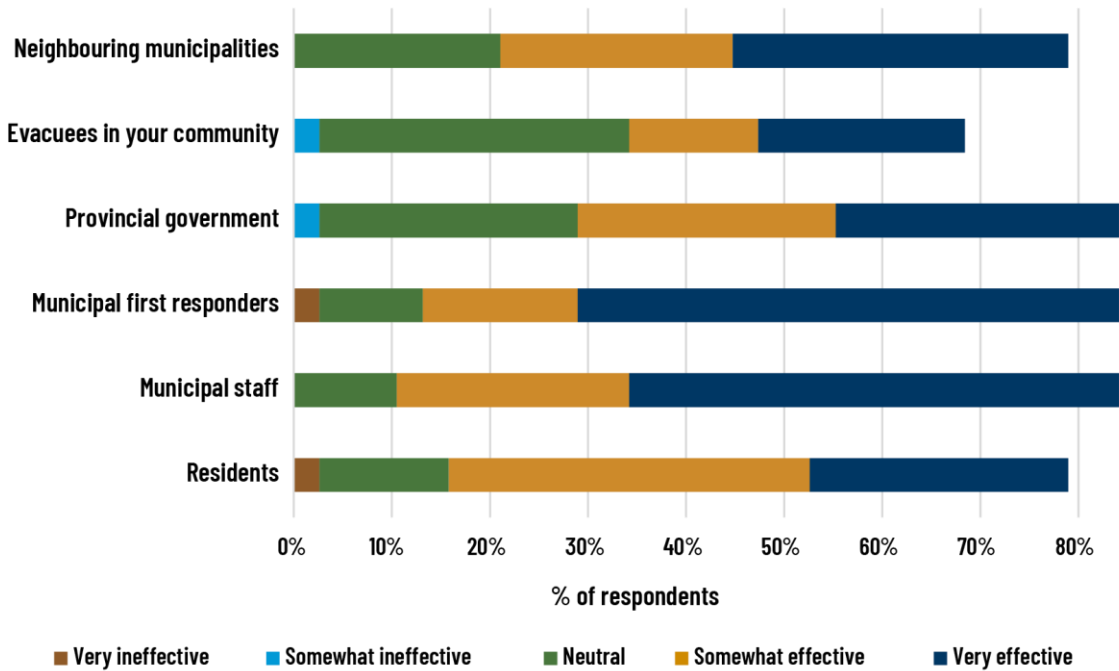
Average incurred cost



## Communication and Collaboration

Respondents were asked to rate their communication with various groups and stakeholders.

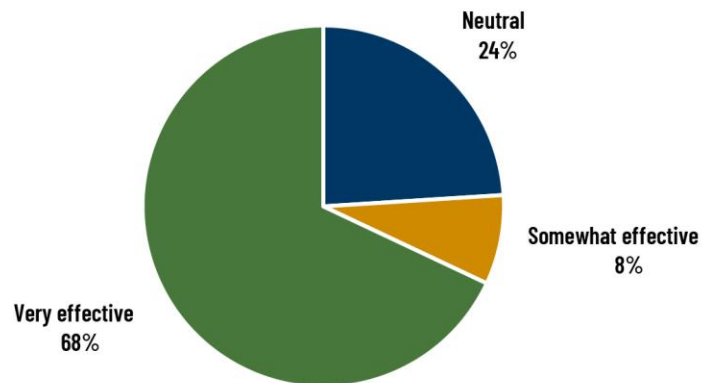
Rate the effectiveness of your municipality's communication with:



In general, survey respondents indicated neutral to generally positive communication effectiveness between their municipality and the variety of different groups they had to communicate with.

Common challenges included difficulties in tailoring messaging for different groups (residents, first responders, media, etc.) in a short timeframe, ensuring people facing communication barriers (due to poor broadband access, etc.) had access to urgent messages, and difficulties in working with provincial decision-makers on consistent messaging.

**Rate the support your municipality received from neighbouring municipalities throughout wildfire season**



Communication successes included the effective use of social media platforms to deliver live updates to residents across the municipality and in evacuation centers, the use of media interviews to put pressure on the province to enhance their response actions, and collaboration with municipal neighbours to harmonize information shared with evacuees from each municipality.

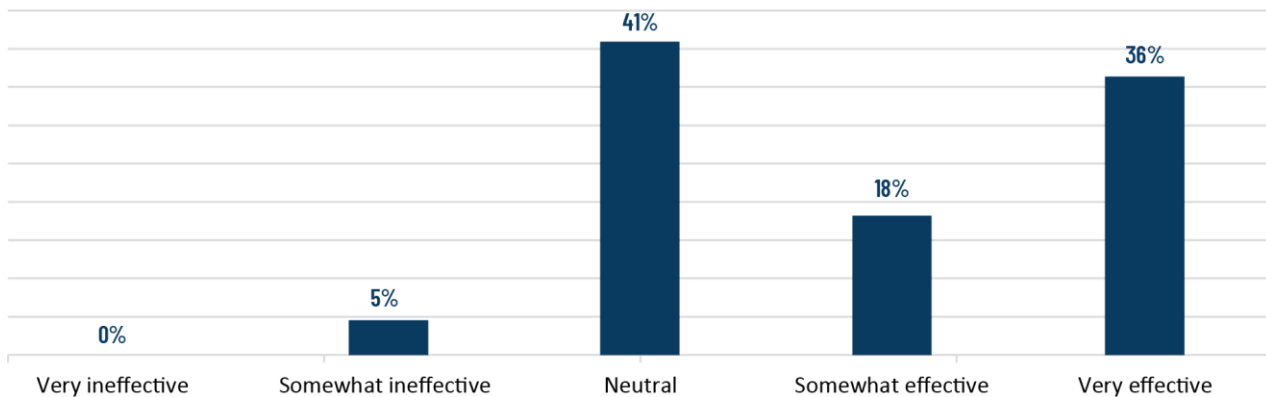
When wildfires spread rapidly across municipal boundaries, intermunicipal collaboration is key. Survey respondents primarily shared examples of effective collaboration with their neighbours in the form of sharing equipment and emergency coordination infrastructure, coordinating evacuation plans and strategies, and sharing information learned from the province. Some examples of collaboration challenges included competing requests for provincial resources and support.

## Provincial Support

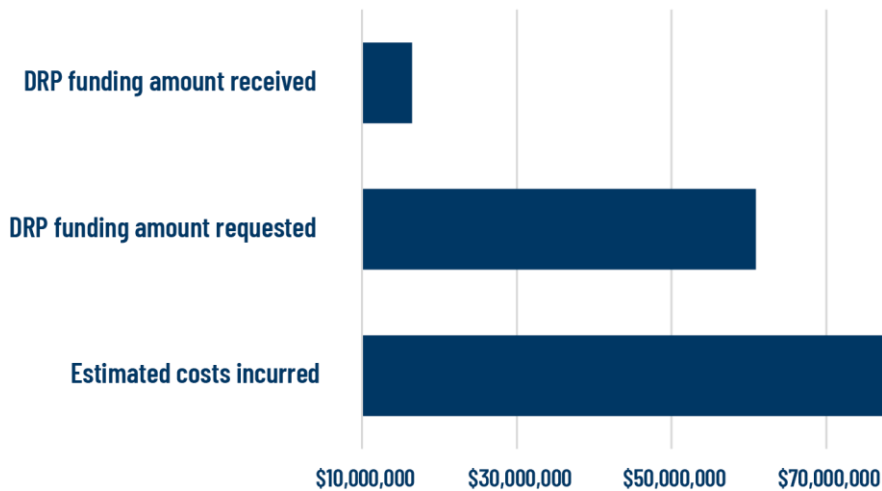
Despite a delay in funding received by municipalities that made a request through the DRP, municipalities generally reported positive communication between them and their designated DRP Manager / Field Officer. No municipalities indicated ineffective communication among those who responded.

However, when it came to gaining information or updates regarding a timeline on when funding would be provided, some respondents indicated they received no communication, or that even though communication was consistent, actual disbursement of DRP funding was delayed. Despite this, a few others reported that timelines were communicated to them, and that funding was received.

**How would you describe the quality and frequency of communication from your designated DRP Area Manager / Field Officer?**



### Requested and received DRP funding compared with incurred costs



An important finding from the survey is that none of the municipalities that requested funding received the full amount requested to date. The majority of municipalities that did receive funding have received between 15% and 50% of what they requested with only two municipalities receiving more than half of what they requested. Overall, the total amount of funding disbursed to municipalities represents approximately 21% of the total costs incurred in the 2023 wildfire season as reported by the survey respondents, which amounts to \$78,568,088.

The Government of Alberta provides wildfire support in various ways, including the disbursement of wildland firefighters and equipment. The survey respondents that received direct provincial services typically found that the Government of Alberta was prepared for the 2023 wildfire season. In contrast, municipalities that did not receive direct provincial support believed that the Government of Alberta was not adequately prepared for the 2023 wildfire season. This shows that the municipalities perceive preparedness as correlating closely with the services that were made available. The survey did not ask if municipalities were expecting provincial support, requested provincial support, or were denied support.

Respondents shared several key areas of improvement for the Government of Alberta ahead of future wildfire seasons, including:

- ◆ More wildland firefighter staffing and training.
- ◆ More collaboration with municipalities.
- ◆ Enhanced access to wildfire mitigation resources, such as FireSmart.
- ◆ Improve relationships with Indigenous nations.
- ◆ Improved training for structural protection strategies.
- ◆ Additional provincial funding to cover the costs during/after wildfire season.
- ◆ Better communication of available resources.

### Solutions and Next Steps

In addition to the suggested improvements in the provincial approach listed above, respondents provided other broader solutions that involve municipalities, government, and other stakeholders.

#### Strengthen existing programs and resources

Many respondents suggested increased funding and awareness for FireSmart to enhance local efforts to de-risk private residences and businesses in communities vulnerable to wildfires.



Respondents expressed support for increased consistency and familiarity among emergency response personnel as well as municipal staff when communicating and coordinating wildfire response. Leveraging existing networks and connections reportedly accelerated response procedures and instilled confidence in municipalities' response capacity. The need for more streamlined response efforts is an important area of potential improvement for municipalities at risk of wildfires in the future.

Similarly, rather than relying on new programs and resources, investing in existing ones, including locally based resources, may be a more cost-effective and time-saving approach to sharing equipment, information, and other resources more easily. Many respondents expressed the need for increased funding towards existing capital, operating and emergency response grants, staff and personnel (such as firefighters and provincial wildland staff), and more investment in familiar programs and services such as the DRP, FireSmart, and Alberta Wildfire. These measures are effective ways to not only respond to but prevent extensive damage from wildfire events.

## Communication

Communication and collaboration stood out as not only an important area of success for municipalities amid wildfire disaster events but also as a critical aspect of effective wildfire response, especially in a scenario of multiple fires across the province and strained provincial capacity.

While intermunicipal collaboration was generally viewed as successful, many respondents identified the need for more effective communication between the province and municipalities. Additionally, communication and media dissemination emerged as a necessary means to adequately inform municipalities of wildfire events and, as such, a key area for development and improvement. This may be implemented and expanded by better preparing municipalities to leverage social media communication, television, radio, and alerts through the Alberta Emergency Management Agency and Alberta Emergency Alert.

Collaborative programs such as the Wildland Urban Interface firefighter training program, as well as collaborative efforts between existing emergency programs and resources can help increase efficiency when dealing with limited resources and large-scale emergencies.

## RMA Advocacy Approach

By understanding the unique and shared experiences of members throughout the 2023 wildfire season, the RMA has the information necessary to move forward with proactive planning, information sharing, and advocacy.

Survey respondents were asked what the RMA can do to help members better prepare for future wildfire seasons. The RMA will follow up with a few key takeaways from respondents, including:

- ◆ Working with the Government of Alberta to ensure that DRP guidelines are improved to reflect the lessons learned from the 2023 wildfire fighters.
- ◆ Maintaining an up-to-date contact list of Emergency Management employees, Chief Administrative Officers, Fire Chiefs, etc. for members to access in the event of an emergency, such as a wildfire.
- ◆ Advocating for a provincial wildfire strategy.

A few key initiatives RMA is working on to support members following this survey include:

- ◆ Working with stakeholders to understand how to best implement FireSmart initiatives in communities across the province.
- ◆ Researching effective wildfire planning and response models in other jurisdictions.



- ◆ Advocating on [Resolution 7-23F](#): Strategy for Management for Wildland Fires Outside Forest Protection Areas.

The RMA will use the information gathered in this survey to determine how the association can best directly support members in building wildfire capacity and sharing best practices. The RMA will also use the information to advocate to the Government of Alberta for specific improvements to their mitigation, planning, response, and recovery approaches moving forward.

