



WoF Team photo

WoF fire fighters deployed to Canada wildfires

Alberta has been experiencing an extreme fire season this year. More than 880 000ha have burnt in these fires, compared to the annual average loss to wildland fires of 147 000ha. In early May, the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre (CIFFC) realised that the extent of the fire burning in Canada this season threatened to outstrip their fire fighting capacity. By the beginning of June, their daily National Fire Situation Report indicated that a significant mobilisation of provincial and international resources was required to assist active provincial agencies. During these extreme fire conditions, the CIFFC coordinates skilled fire fighting teams, equipment and aerial resources to push back the ravaging spread of these fires. The CIFFC mobilised support from other Canadian provinces and called for support from a number of international partners.

40 fire fighters from the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries' Working on Fire (WoF) programme were requested to assist the Canadian province of Alberta in combatting its wildland fires. WoF selected two 20-person type 1 fire fighting teams based on skills and experience, fitness and an exemplary track record of

integrity and discipline, hailing from across the nine provinces in South Africa. 30 percent of the selected fire fighters were female, a unique characteristic of the WoF fire fighting force. As part of their WoF learning culture, the team was a blend of highly experienced fire fighters with previous deployment experience and participants experiencing their first opportunity to serve on an overseas assignment.

The WoF Wolfpack Hotshots Team was led by:

- WoF MD, Trevor Abrahams, who served as the senior agency representative (SREP) in Canada
- WoF's national general operations manager, Martin Bolton, who served as the international agency representative at the CIFFC in Winnipeg
- WoF's acting general manager in KwaZulu-Natal, Bongani Nhlabathi, who served as the agency representative at the Chuckegg Creek fire
- Regional manager Bonagani Mashiane (from Mpumalanga) and ground operations manager, Antoinette Jini (from Eastern Cape), served as leaders of the WoF teams.

The WoF Hotshots team assembled at the WoF Academy in Nelspruit for a team briefing on the mission ahead, to complete all required administrative, medical and governance procedures and for training on all new Canadian equipment and systems in preparation for their deployment to Canada.

The WoF teams left for Canada in three groups:

- An advance party of WoF executives departed on 20 June – Martin bound for the CIFFC's offices in Winnipeg and Trevor bound for Winnipeg and Edmonton to confirm the arrival logistics for the teams.
- Group 1 departed on 23 June 2019 via Johannesburg-Frankfurt-Toronto-Calgary-Edmonton.
- Group 2 departed on 23 June 2019 via Johannesburg-London-Vancouver-Edmonton.
- Group 3 departed 23 June 2019 via Johannesburg-Amsterdam-Calgary-Edmonton.

Barbara Creecy, Minister of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, conveyed to the team the sentiments of the South African people, "My very best wishes go with ▶



Teamwork made fireline work a breeze with fire fighters still smiling after recovering equipment from burned areas



WoF Canada team heads towards the fireline

▶ you on this important deployment. It is an honour to be asked to assist the Canadians in combatting their wildfires and a tribute to the skills, discipline and fitness in the Working on Fire programme."

The full WoF Hotshots team assembled in Edmonton by the evening of 24 June 2019, ready for action.

On the fireline

The WoF fire fighters joined teams from Alberta, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, New Brunswick, Ontario, Manitoba, the Yukon, North West Territories, Mexico and USA, who were all deployed to combat the huge Chuckegg Creek fire that ignited on 12 May 2019 and had already burnt over 350 134ha (26 July 2019), demolishing seven homes.

Evacuation measures were being applied in the town of High Level and surrounding hamlets. After a rest day in Edmonton, the team collected their Canadian-issued tents and equipment, concluded a briefing by Alberta Wildfire personnel and set off on the nine hour- long bus ride from Edmonton to the main camp at the Chuckegg Creek fire, approximately four kilometres south of the small town of High Level. On 27 June 2019, the WoF fire fighters eagerly started their first tour of duty on the western flank of this huge fire. The day started, like every other day would, with a WoF parade, singing of the National Anthem, prayer and announcements before bussing off to the various staging areas for joint team briefings. It took almost an hour to get from the base camp to the staging area.

Teams were then dispatched in Bell 212 and Bell 205 helicopters (similar to the WoF Hueys) to a landing zone close to the fire line or transported in all terrain Haglund vehicles to the fire site. The team was to spend the first 14 days on the fire boundary line, extinguishing the hotspots, burning ash pits and smouldering peat fires.

The exposure to new techniques, approaches, equipment and the novelty of fighting underground fires have greatly enhanced the skills set of the South African WoF Hotshots team. The divisional supervisor formally assessed the work and professionalism of the WoF fire fighters team to be of a high standard.

At the high point of this huge fire, over 1 180 fire fighters were on hand supporting Canada in this fight. No lives were lost.



Planning, strategising and evaluation vital for effective fire fighting operations. WoF crew with IMT

The Evolution of the WoF SA-Canada Partnership

In 2011, the Kishugu Group, the holding company to which Working on Fire (Pty) Ltd belongs, hosted their fifth International Wildland Fire Conference in Sun City, which was widely attended by international industry professionals.

WoF and Kishugu demonstrated their fire fighting capabilities in the Pilanesberg National Park, providing insight to the various offerings of the brand. Kim Connors, the executive director of the Canadian Interagency Forest Firefighting Centre (CIFFC), extended an invitation to Working on Fire to assist Canada in suppressing

their wildland fires in cases where disaster fires outstrip their domestic and neighbouring support capacity. Canada has historically drawn resources from Mexico, the USA and sometimes Southern Europe and Australasia.

In 2015, the Canadian Assistant Deputy Minister of Forestry, Glen Mason and Trevor Abrahams, the then Secretary-General of the XIV World Forestry Congress, cemented the partnership between the CIFFC and WoF Pty Ltd, resulting in the first and second deployments of WoF fire fighters to Canada in 2015 and 2016.

The South African government, led by the late Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs, Edna Molewa, pursued a bilateral agreement to establish the basis for providing mutual assistance and implementing actions in other areas of cooperation in wildland fire management between Canada and South Africa. On 24 January 2019, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Canadian and South African governments to provide for such deployments.

Sharing the WoF SA flavour with our hosts

The team was well looked after by their Canadian hosts, always receiving a warm meal in the evenings when they returned to the base camp. The WoF fire fighters rested on their days off at the Alberta Wildfire's Hinton Training Centre, saw a few Canadian bighorn sheep, mountain goats and elk and also had the opportunity to visit the Miette Hot Springs in the world-famous Jasper National Park and the town of Jasper.

Even though the WoF team was far away from home, on 18 July 2019, in celebration of the memory of Nelson Mandela, the WoF team spent the day with a group of local retired farmers, cleaning and restoring their barn and stables for their large herd of horses. When the hard day's work was done, the WoF fire fighters gave a poignant rendition of the late Johnny Clegg's Asimbonanga, a host of other songs and gumboot dancing. This left an indelible impression on the elderly in this farming community.

The WoF fire fighters' singing quickly became widely acclaimed, with the team regularly serenading fire fighters



Making sure that fires do not spread underground is vital

who were celebrating their birthdays on the fire line. This eventually inspired an anthem singing competition, with our WoF fire fighters' sharing our unique SA flavour. This just made our everyday WoF heroes feel famous, being inundated with requests for pictures and exchanges of WoF T-shirts and memorabilia.

Throughout this deployment, the WoF team remained disciplined and in high spirits, doing their duty as shining ambassadors for Working on Fire and South Africa.

Always ready to answer the call, to make a difference

As the third deployment to Canada drew to a close, fire fighters reflected fondly on their international experience and the exchange of

knowledge, skills and camaraderie, while flying the SA flag high.

There was growing excitement though about the return home. On their return, the team stopped in Edmonton for the night before returning in three groups via London-Amsterdam-Frankfurt-Johannesburg, with all back at home safely on 30 July 2019. On arrival, the team was met by the Minister of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, the Canadian High Commissioner, Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries officials and WoF management.

Even after their return to South Africa, the Chuckegg Creek fire was listed as "being held". The WoF team wishes their Canadian counterparts a continued safe and courageous fight on the fire line. ▲



Teams are dispatched in Bell 212 and Bell 205 to a landing zone close to the fireline

