



New Zealand IMT Contingent to Canada 2015 Alberta Wildfire Management Area High Level

Update # 1 17 July 2015

Canada is undergoing an extreme fire season, the likes of which has not been seen in 20 years.

Seventeen rural fire experts from across New Zealand have headed over to Canada to help combat the extreme wildfire situation happening there.

Russell Barclay is our NRFA New Zealand Liaison Officer – he's part of the New Zealand contingent in Canada, and he's keeping us up-to-date with what's happening over there.

Plus check out our NRFA Facebook page for more news and photos along the way.

Greetings to all, and welcome to our first newsletter for the Canada Deployment.

First, a bit of background...

Canada has been fighting an extreme wildfire situation since April. There's an extreme drought situation thanks to lack of the usual June rains and wildfires are raging across British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan, with over 500,000 hectares burned or burning.

The Executive Director of CIFFC (Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre) wrote to the NZ National Rural Fire Officer Kevin O'Connor asking for specialist rural fire support. This was very willingly agreed, and made so much easier because New Zealand already had an agreement in place from the previous deployment in 2009.

An International Manifest was sent over by the Canadians, and a team was selected from personnel who matched the brief and who were prepared and available to undertake a 35-day deployment.

Sixteen people from across New Zealand plus a NZ Liaison Officer met in Auckland last week and undertook the NRFA pre-deployment briefing with Deployment Team Leader/Incident Controller John Sutton and Kevin O'Connor.

On our way

After the briefing, the team boarded the 13-hour flight to Vancouver. A short stop there, plus a change of flight and onto Edmonton, another 2 hour journey. The good news is you arrive at the start of the same day you left on, so your body clock acclimatises faster.

The team checked into their hotel (Holiday Inn Express Suites), had by a quick get-together with the local liaisons and briefing personnel, then supper and a quiet night.

Day 1 Briefing

We cracked into a briefing first thing. This is undertaken by very professional people, well constructed and presented in a manner that was open and very informative.

In the briefing they covered;

- A general overview of the Alberta Region and extent of the fires, history and the present state of these fires.
- A Fire Behaviour Specialist overview which also included weather patterns.
- Tree species, scrub and grasses along with the makeup of the environment; mostly conifer and aspen plus black and white spruce are fuelling the fires.
- Aircraft Management – this was expanded on for those who were involved in the breakout group, as this will be a large part of the resource used in this remote area.
- Animals and insects that may be encountered along the way, including some very interesting* aspects of their activity and behaviour**.

**A camera crew arrived about halfway through this bit, and managed to capture some of our facial expressions on hearing this “interesting” information – which made for some good TV viewing later...*

***He quoted an old wise tale of those in the environment using pepper spray and small bells on their backpacks to alert the animals, and give them warning someone is in their patch of wilderness.*

He then went on to explain how to tell the difference between a Black Bear and Grizzly Bear scat. The Grizzlies one is full of black pepper and bells!!

The warning was to keep clear if you see or come across one; apparently they can run as fast as a race horse. (This is not a beer ad either!).



The Grizzly, Moose, Tick & Cougar – Photos by Mike Kakoullis, Environment and Sustainable Resource Development.

Kitting up

The afternoon was taken up with the weigh-in of both the PPE/Kit bags, along with the personnel themselves for the flight manifest in preparation for the flight through to High Level, as they were travelling on a private chartered flight.

(You'll see in the photos a lot of green bags around. These are individual kits which include their own tent, sleeping bag, pillow, sleeping mat (not very thick either – something for Logistics to work on maybe?), helmet, gloves and first aid kit).



The weigh-in. – Photos by RB

They were also issued with a hand-held radio each for the duration of the trip, and some of the party were issued cell-phones as well, which will only work in the local area where they are based.

After everyone was kitted up, some of the team went into town for some last-minute necessities, back in time for dinner and another quiet night. (Day 2 and the body clock still trying to catch up!)

Expanding the team

The area we've been assigned to is remote and will involve extensive aerial operations.

To help in the management of this, our team has been assigned three Australian Specialist Aircraft Managers.

We met them at our briefing and we've slotted together very well already. There's the usual Aussie-Kiwi banter as you can imagine, especially with rugby and us winning the last bit of silverware between the two countries. (And in case you've forgotten it was the Highlanders...)

In fact they felt so much part of the team that two of them held the NZ flag for us in the departing photo, before we were on the bus and off to the plane.



A safety officer's job is never done!



The I/C Checking the last of his Team on board.

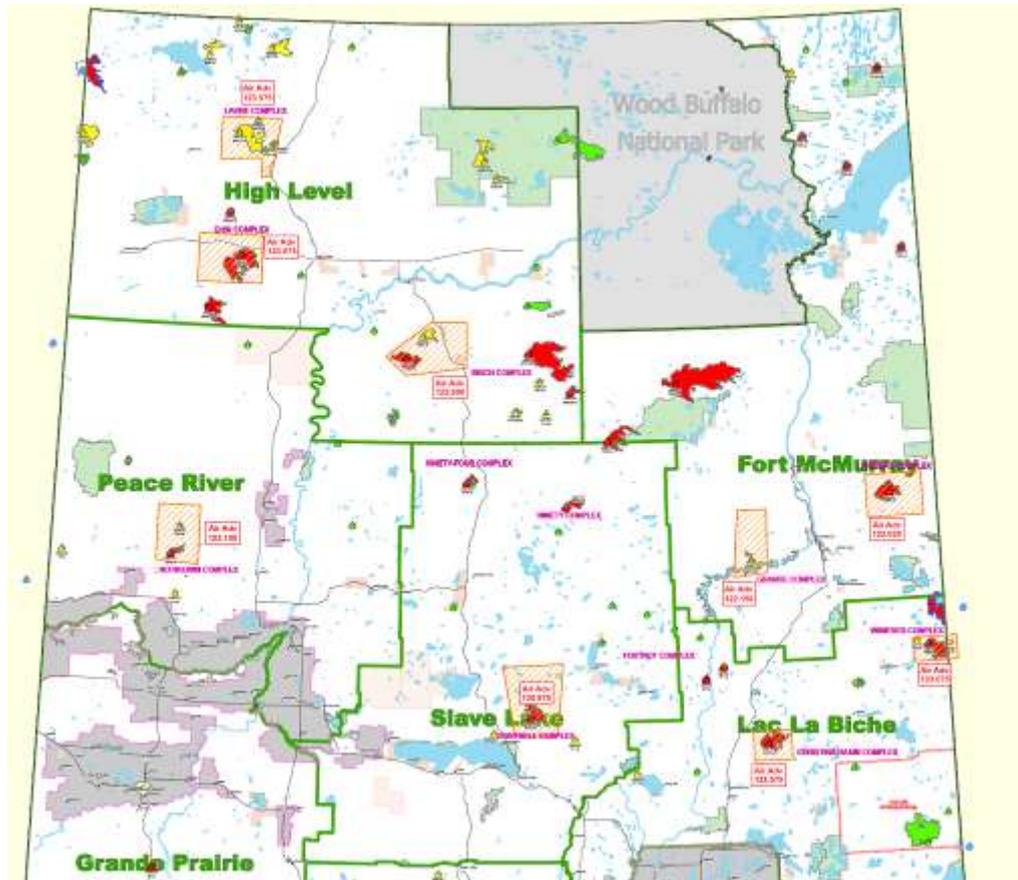
Where we're based

Our team has been tasked to the High Level Wildfire Management Area of Alberta, which is in the north of the region.

On arrival at the High Level Base, the team had another briefing before driving to a small township to the east called Fort Vermillion.

The base is set up in an old quarry with a large number of Porta-Coms as base buildings, which from all accounts have a lot of space for each unit. The team set up their personal tents on arrival before getting a local briefing.

The fires they are assigned to are called the "Birch Complex" – the map below shows where they are.



The NZ IMT is located in the bottom right section of the High Level Wildfire Management Area.

This group of fires are referred to as the Birch Complex.

More info

If you want to know more about what's happening over in Canada, three good sites to visit online are:

- "Alberta Wildfire" - Once opened up and you click on the fire map, this goes to all the fires across Canada and you can see the details of each one by clicking on the coloured box.
- "Alberta Weather"
- "CIFFC" (Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre) website, which posts a public briefing paper each day.

If you need to contact any of the team for any reason while they're on deployment, get in touch with National Rural Fire Authority's Abi Davidson in the first instance:

- DDI: (04) 496 3688
- Mobile: (021) 985 217
- Email: abi.davidson@fire.org.nz.

Please be aware that the team are in a very remote part of Canada and contact or communication with the outside world may not be possible at times.

All in all, the team are all very well and looking forward to getting stuck into doing what's needed.

I'll be in touch soon with more updates for you from Canada.

Cheers,
Russell Barclay - NZ Liaison



Bertie Beaver, Alberta's National Icon