

Emergency Preparedness Week: Fire and Evacuation Planning



Emergency Preparedness Week in Canada takes place during the first full week of May (in 2026, it runs from May 3 to May 9). This national awareness initiative is an ideal time for organizations to review, test, and strengthen their emergency planning, particularly around fire risks and evacuation procedures. For Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) managers and HR directors, this period serves as a timely reminder that fire preparedness is a critical component of protecting lives, maintaining business continuity, and meeting due diligence obligations.

Across Canada, wildfire seasons are becoming longer and more severe, while structural fires remain a persistent workplace hazard. Whether your organization operates in forestry, construction, manufacturing, healthcare, or office environments, the potential for fire-related emergencies demands a proactive and well-documented evacuation plan.

A robust fire and evacuation plan begins with a thorough hazard assessment. This includes identifying ignition sources, fuel loads, and environmental conditions that may increase fire risk. In wildfire-prone regions, external threats such as nearby forests, grasslands, or industrial operations must also be considered. Internally, common risks include electrical equipment, flammable materials, hot work activities, and inadequate housekeeping practices.

Once hazards are identified, organizations must establish clear evacuation procedures tailored to their worksites. This includes mapping primary and secondary exit routes, designating assembly points at safe distances, and ensuring accessibility for all workers, including those with disabilities. OHS managers should ensure that evacuation maps are posted prominently and updated regularly to reflect any changes in layout or operations.

Equally important is the assignment of roles and responsibilities. Fire wardens or floor monitors should be trained to lead evacuations, conduct headcounts, and liaise with emergency responders. HR directors play a key role in ensuring that training programs are in place, records are maintained, and communication protocols are inclusive and effective across the workforce.

Communication is often the weakest link in emergency response. Organizations should implement multiple alert systems, such as alarms, public address systems, and mobile notifications to ensure rapid dissemination of evacuation instructions. In remote or outdoor worksites, this may include radios or satellite communication devices. During wildfire events, staying connected to local emergency alerts and municipal evacuation orders is essential.

Training and drills are where plans are put to the test. Canadian regulations typically require regular fire drills, but leading organizations go beyond minimum compliance by conducting scenario-based exercises, including blocked exits or simulated smoke conditions. These drills help identify gaps in response, reinforce worker confidence, and ensure that evacuation procedures can be executed under stress.

Documentation is another critical component. A written fire safety plan should outline procedures, responsibilities, training schedules, and maintenance requirements for fire protection systems such as extinguishers, alarms, and

sprinklers. This document should be reviewed at least annually and after any incident or significant operational change.

As wildfire risks increase, organizations should also consider broader emergency preparedness measures. This includes business continuity planning, remote work contingencies, and coordination with local emergency services. For worksites in high-risk areas, pre-evacuation planning, such as transportation logistics and temporary relocation strategies, may be necessary.

Emergency Preparedness Week is an opportunity to build a culture of readiness. For OHS and HR leaders, effective fire and evacuation planning is a shared responsibility that requires coordination, training, and continuous improvement. By taking action now, organizations can reduce risk, protect workers, and respond confidently when emergencies arise.

Emergency Preparedness Checklist

- Conduct a fire risk and hazard assessment (internal and external).
- Develop and document a site-specific evacuation plan.
- Clearly mark and maintain all exit routes and emergency lighting.
- Designate and train fire wardens and emergency coordinators.
- Install and regularly test fire alarms and communication systems.
- Provide fire extinguisher training and ensure accessibility.
- Post updated evacuation maps in visible locations.
- Schedule and document regular fire drills (at least annually).
- Establish procedures for assisting vulnerable workers.
- Monitor local wildfire alerts and integrate into emergency plans.