

The Last Safe Decision



A devastating fire during a Canadian Armed Forces training exercise at CFB Wainwright on October 17, 2026, killed four service members and injured others. National Defence has said high winds caused the fire to spread rapidly through the training area. The circumstances remain under investigation, and no responsible outside observer can say from the public record which decisions or protections did or did not work. The loss deserves compassion and patience as the facts are established. [1][2]

For Canadian employers, the tragedy also brings attention to an unsettling characteristic of some hazards: the safe window for responding can close much faster than people expect. The issue is familiar to anyone who oversees wildfire-exposed field work, excavation, industrial fire protection, chemical releases, flooding, remote operations or work around unstable structures. An organization may have a detailed emergency plan and still face a critical question that the document does not settle. When is it time to abandon the task, rather than continue monitoring the hazard?

That decision must be made while departure is still possible. Waiting until danger is unmistakable may mean waiting too long.

Emergency plans often begin one step too late

A conventional evacuation plan answers important questions. It identifies alarms, routes, wardens, assembly areas, first aid and emergency contacts. CCOHS recommends those elements, along with alternate means of escape and clear responsibilities. [3] But there is a decision before the alarm: someone must conclude that staying has become less safe than leaving. If that judgment is improvised during a fast-moving incident, the organization may spend its remaining response time debating whether the threshold has been reached.

Imagine a hypothetical roadside utility crew working near a wooded area. Smoke is visible several kilometres away, though the worksite is initially unaffected. Over the next hour, wind strengthens, visibility drops and the road used to reach the site becomes congested. The crew leader is monitoring the situation while trying to complete a repair that residents urgently need. At what point should the crew pack up? If the answer is 'when we can see flames nearby,' the trigger may be tied to evidence that arrives after the safest departure window has narrowed.

The important distinction is between a trigger to watch more closely and a trigger to leave. Not every adverse condition calls for evacuation. But every operation exposed to rapid escalation should identify what signs warrant heightened readiness, what conditions require suspension of work and what conditions demand immediate withdrawal. That hierarchy makes decisions clearer before the situation becomes emotionally or operationally difficult.

Escape time is a resource, and it can be spent without noticing

Safety professionals are accustomed to thinking about exposure in terms of likelihood and consequence. For developing emergencies, time deserves equal attention. A worker may need several minutes to secure equipment, reach a vehicle, travel an access road and account for the team. If the hazard can overwhelm that route more quickly, the plan depends on a margin that may not exist.

This is not a claim that any particular timeline applied at Wainwright. It is a general planning problem for civilian employers. The available evacuation window changes with terrain, weather, congestion, mobility, communications and the number of people who must be moved. A route that works for five workers with vehicles close at hand may fail for fifty workers spread across a large area. A safe muster point in one wind direction may become unsuitable when conditions reverse. The plan needs to acknowledge those differences rather than assume that sounding an alarm will automatically produce a safe evacuation.

In its August 2026 wildfire advisory, WorkSafeBC advised employers to determine when evacuation might be necessary and to maintain clear primary and alternate routes. [4] The message is particularly relevant to remote operations, where the road out may be the same road needed by emergency responders coming in. A plan should consider how quickly the path could become unavailable and whether workers have a practical alternative.

The pressure to finish can turn a warning into a debate

Workers rarely make these decisions in a vacuum. The mine is trying to restore production. The construction project is already late. A hospital unit cannot easily abandon patients. A utility crew knows that leaving means another neighbourhood remains without service. These are real operational pressures, not evidence that people don't care about safety. Yet they can push a decision further down the timeline while everyone looks for more certainty.

A supervisor may reasonably want another weather update before shutting down. A manager may ask whether conditions are 'really that bad.' A contractor may insist that its work is almost finished. The issue is not that any one of those questions is inherently improper. It is that, under a rapidly escalating hazard, each round of clarification consumes the same minutes workers may later need to leave.

Senior leaders should therefore decide in advance which evacuation decisions are delegated to the person closest to the risk. If that person must obtain senior approval, the process must be fast enough for the credible hazard. Workers also need assurance that an early withdrawal made in good faith will be supported, even if the feared event never reaches the site. A false alarm may be inconvenient; a decision made too late can be irreversible.

The strongest controls make evacuation less likely to be

needed

An evacuation plan is necessary, but it should never become the employer's entire answer to a foreseeable catastrophic hazard. Sometimes the stronger choice is to avoid exposing workers in the first place. The hierarchy of controls begins with eliminating hazards or reducing exposure through more reliable means, rather than depending exclusively on people to recognize danger and escape. CCOHS places those principles at the heart of risk-based OHS management. [5]

For an outdoor operation, that may mean cancelling a planned activity when forecast conditions exceed a defined threshold, relocating the work, removing ignition sources or postponing a hazardous task. A plant may prevent escalation with automatic isolation or engineered containment. A construction site may suspend high-risk lifting before winds reach unsafe limits. In each example, the last safe decision can be made well before an evacuation becomes necessary.

There is a business benefit here as well, although it should never be the main justification. Operations that build withdrawal criteria into planning are better able to manage disruption than those forced into improvised shutdowns during an emergency. The former may be frustrating; the latter is often chaotic, and the human cost can be enormous.

Plans must survive broken assumptions

Emergency planning often relies on quiet assumptions: the alarm can be heard, the main exit is usable, every worker has a phone, the site map is current and the shift supervisor knows who is present. The assumptions may be reasonable on an ordinary day. The problem is that an emergency can remove

several of them at once.

CCOHS guidance calls for alternate communication methods, clearly identified escape routes, safe assembly locations and accounting for workers. It also emphasizes protecting people ahead of property during response. [3] Those requirements should be interpreted operationally. Can a worker hear the alarm while using hearing protection? Can seasonal staff understand the instructions? Will a crew in a remote valley receive a cellular alert? Is the alternate route wide enough for vehicles leaving simultaneously? Who knows whether a contractor changed its headcount after the morning briefing?

Rather than file these questions under 'emergency plan reviewed,' put them into a drill. Disable the primary communication method in a tabletop exercise. Assume the favoured muster area is downwind of a fictional release. Ask the team to account for people when the designated warden is absent. The purpose is not to prove that everyone can follow a script. It is to find the weaknesses before a real incident does.

Rehearse the decision, not just the exit

Too many drills begin after the hardest decision has already been made. The alarm sounds, workers walk toward an assembly area, names are checked, and the event is declared a success. That tests movement and accountability, which matter, but it tells management little about whether warning signals would have been recognized early enough to launch the response.

A better exercise begins with ambiguous information. A weather forecast changes. A monitoring instrument shows an unusual trend. A caller reports smoke beyond the property line. Then add competing demands, as real workplaces always have them. An

equipment fault needs attention; a contractor asks to continue; a worker cannot be reached. Listen to the decisions being made. Who asks about the remaining escape window? Who raises the possibility of withdrawing now? What additional information is genuinely necessary, and what would only delay a sensible choice?

WorkSafeBC encourages employers to train workers, conduct emergency drills and review procedures when workplace circumstances change. [6] An exercise that identifies an unclear trigger or slow approval chain has done valuable work. The corrective action is not simply to tell the team to be more alert. It may require an earlier trigger, a second exit, an independent alarm, a better map or the authority to shut down without waiting for permission.

Leadership should ask about the margin, not just the plan

Boards and senior executives often receive assurance that emergency response plans are current and drills are complete. Those indicators are useful, but incomplete. A stronger review asks how much time workers need to get clear of the worst credible hazard, what could reduce that time, how early the organization would detect the change and who has authority to act. It also asks whether a shutdown or evacuation has been postponed because of commercial pressure, and whether workers feel safe challenging that decision.

These questions deserve attention in Canadian workplaces because hazards are becoming harder to treat as static. Severe weather, wildfire smoke, extreme heat, changing site layouts, contractor turnover and tighter operating schedules can all affect how quickly conditions develop and how reliably people can escape. CCOHS advises employers to incorporate extreme weather and other climate-related events into emergency

assessments rather than assume past experience defines future risk. [7]

The crucial measure is whether the organization can make a protective decision before its options disappear. Not every hazard can be anticipated. Not every emergency can be prevented. But employers can strengthen the circumstances in which people make difficult choices, including the information they receive, the authority they hold and the time they have to act.

What Wainwright can and cannot teach us today

The findings of the Wainwright investigation will be essential to understanding that particular event. It would be unfair to the people involved and the families affected to use an unfinished investigation as a case study in alleged mistakes. The military training context also differs from the legal and operational framework of civilian OHS workplaces, so the two should not be treated as interchangeable.

Still, the broader question is legitimate and urgent. Does the emergency plan tell people how to leave, or does it also help them recognize when they must leave? Are withdrawal decisions rehearsed when information is incomplete, and are workers supported when they act early? Those are not questions that belong only to wildfire season or extraordinary operations. They belong wherever a developing hazard can outrun an organization's decision-making.

The last safe decision is rarely obvious while someone is making it. A capable OHS system gives people the best chance of recognizing that moment before it has passed.