



HARVESTING ACTIVITIES POST-WILDFIRE CARRY POTENTIAL RISKS TO WORKERS

With two summers of significant wildfire activity behind us—and a record burn of 53 million cubic metres of timber in 2017 alone, and in 2018, the third worst wildfire season on record at time of writing, it is timely to consider the potential risks of harvesting burnt wood.

Much of the timber touched by fire will be salvageable, but logging-damaged fibre presents its own set of risks and hazards that need to be identified, evaluated, planned for and controlled. In addition to considering the technological and timing challenges of salvaging burnt wood before it loses value, potential health and safety risks to workers need to be addressed.

The most obvious risk after a forest fire is tree stability and the potential for tree failure. Fire may cause damage to

limbs, stems or root systems, so careful assessment and mitigation of dangerous trees is key, as well as communication

Activities such as falling, skidding, sorting, loading and hauling logs can expose workers to ash particulates and dust,

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of potential hazards to site supervisors and crews. The Wildlife Danger Tree Assessor Certificate Program provides guidance to employers working in high stem-density sites such as wildfire burn areas as to what needs to be assessed and how the sampling is done.

The next most immediate and serious risk to workers is exposure to wood ash.

especially where ground cover has been depleted. Wood ash particulate can also become airborne through the handling of blackened logs and debarking activities.

Ash from forest fires is a complex mixture that can change depending on the temperature of the fire. The lower the temperature, the more carbon is present in the ash, and the blacker it

UPDATED

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appears; higher temperatures can result in the production of more calcium carbonate, which is a lung irritant.

Short-term health effects from wood-ash exposure can include eye, nose and throat irritation, cough, and allergic reactions. In the long term, exposure may lead to more serious health issues, including lung diseases such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). These risks extend not just to logging operations but to any industry that operates in this environment, such as land- and wildfire-management personnel, surveyors, and tree planters when restocking the burned-out areas.

To identify whether your workers are at risk, employers should perform a site walk-through looking for signs of ash exposure. Black residue on workers' hands or clothing, or black deposits on

the tools, equipment or vehicles they use, is an obvious indication. Any worker complaining of eye, nose or throat irritation, or allergic symptoms, is another.

Part 5 of the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation outlines employer responsibilities for controlling exposures to hazardous substances. Exposures must either be eliminated or reduced below harmful levels with the help of engineering and administrative controls, and the use of personal protective equipment.

Workplace exposure to wood ash and dust can also be reduced in the following ways: by educating workers about these hazards; providing hand and face washing facilities to remove black dust from skin; providing personal eyewash units; assuring that vehicle and equipment cabs are sealed properly and operated with the windows closed, using a

cab filtration system that is appropriate to the particulate size and is frequently inspected and maintained; and considering the use of respiratory protection that has a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter and disposable coveralls for workers who spend most of their time outside of vehicles.▲

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