Re.Climate™
COMMUNICATING FOR CHANGE

Damage from the White Rock Lake wildfire is seen on a property in the Paxton Valley, near Monte Lake, B.C. on August 10, 2021. PHOTO BY JESSE WINTER

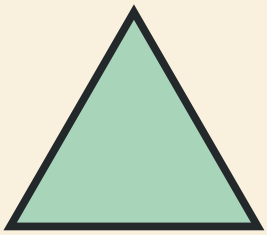
WILDFIRES AND "UN-NATURAL DISASTERS"

A Tip Sheet for Communicators

These tips provide guidelines and strategies for climate communicators on how to engage Canadians in conversations about the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme events like wildfires due to climate change. The framing, narrative, image, and strategic recommendations in the guide are based on focus groups conducted by Re.Climate, peer-reviewed literature, and research by Climate Visuals and Potential Energy.

CHOICE

Wildfires will keep getting worse until we stop burning fossil fuels.



CHALLENGE

Climate change is harming us directly—or through people we know—harming our health, burning homes and communities in places we know and love.

OPPORTUNITY

Let's pull together—join with millions of Canadians worried about climate change who want our governments to hold big polluters accountable.

Bring it back to basics: Talk about causes and impacts, then link to solutions. Use simple language. Hit repeat.

A key moment to interpret climate change

- **Provide an entry to climate change and reinforce that it is happening now, name events and locations:**
  - "These are ***unnatural*** disasters. Climate change is harming us directly—or through people we know—harming our health, burning homes and communities in places we know and love.""
- **Validate concern** about climate change:
  - "We're all facing this together. Let's pull together to protect the people and places we care about."
- **Share facts, counter misinformation** as disaster moments generate information-seeking:
  - "Disasters like these are increasing in frequency because of climate change."

Pivot to:

- **The cause of climate change: pollution from burning fossil fuels.** So, we need to regulate pollution, hold polluters accountable.
  - "These unnatural disasters are fuelled by burning fossil fuels like oil, gas and coal."
  - Wildfires will keep getting worse until we stop burning fossil fuels (emissions have to go to zero).
- **Reinforce urgency and solidarity:**
  - "Join the millions of Canadians pushing our government to crack down and regulate fossil fuel (carbon)[1] pollution."

Acknowledge that:

- It's a big global problem: Canada's actions alone won't stop wildfires. But every tonne of fossil fuel pollution we reduce matters and Canada is a big source of this pollution. (See Useful Facts section)
- Advanced economies like Canada need to regulate pollution and innovate. We need to show the way and keep up with record-setting investments in renewable energy in countries like China. The world needs to act together.

1 Communicators often use the term "carbon pollution". We insert "carbon" in parenthesis to reflect that common practice, but suggest that to address the challenge of linking extreme events to fossil fuels that we use the term "fossil fuel pollution" and that we test these terms further in our communications research.

Be careful to:

- Be sensitive to the needs of people directly affected by an extreme event who are dealing with personal trauma and requiring emergency assistance.
- Remember that people not directly affected by an extreme event but who are engaging through media want details and explanations about the event and its causes.
- Use human-centered stories. Facts and science are important when people are information-seeking but human stories move people.
- Steer clear of fussy attribution and complex uncertainty—stress what is known. Scientists and communicators need to work very closely together.

Images are most impactful

Try using a collage if one photo does not adequately cover Climate Visuals best practice principles (e.g., show real people, show emotionally powerful impacts, show local impacts, show climate change causes, impacts, and solutions at scale). Showing larger numbers of people and homes, or community and natural settings being affected suggests broader risk. Showing people at scale helping each other suggests a social coming together.

- **Show the emotional, personal, human side of impacts, the risks people face, ideally with faces visible and at scale if possible:** inspecting or defending homes, evacuating, at evacuation centres.
- **Show impacts at scale** and people helping people.
- **Show medical and health impacts** of smoke: people wearing masks, patients in hospital.[2]

Avoid when possible: People dressed casually watching flames at a distance.

Avoid at all costs: "Fun in the sun" (water parks, ice cream, people at the beach) when depicting heat. Images of heat need to convey "medical emergency."

Firefighters collect their breakfast from a caterer at a fire camp in Vanderhoof, B.C. on July 21, 2023. PHOTO BY JESSE WINTER

A wildfire burns at night above the shores of Lake Okanagan outside Kelowna, B.C. on July 20, 2018. PHOTO BY JESSE WINTER

Firefighters from an Alaska smoke jumpers unit refuel with pizza on the fire line of a wildfire burning near a highway in northern British Columbia, Canada on July 11, 2023. PHOTO BY JESSE WINTER

Firefighters from the B.C. Wildfire Service work to contain a spot fire started by a helicopter dropping incendiary devices as part of a large prescribed fire plan on the Aq'am community's territory outside Cranbrook, B.C. on April 28, 2023. PHOTO BY JESSE WINTER

2 Wildfire is surprisingly difficult to portray. Focus group participants didn't respond viscerally to most images—evacuation shots mostly show lines of vehicles, forest fires show trees, images of homes and flames rarely contain human faces. When possible, a collage may be best.

Messengers

Amplify scientists, doctors and affected people.

Important: People trust scientists—but they're thinking about frontline scientists with dirty boots and smoky faces: fire chiefs, wildland fire researchers, asthma doctors (not necessarily Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change scientists).

"IT'S MORE LIKE THE FRONT LINE KIND OF SCIENTIST... FIREFIGHTERS [AND THE] ORIGINAL PEOPLE [WHO] HAVE DONE THE RESEARCH."

— Patrick, focus group participant.

Setting the mental frame

1. **Climate change makes wildfires much, much worse.**
   - Climate change creates the conditions (hotter, drier, more lightning strikes) that make wildfires more likely and more dangerous — all fires are caused by an ignition (lightning, sparks from power lines, people's campfires, etc.).
2. **Urgent need to get fire-smart and boost emergency preparedness.**
   - Canadians relate to wildfire in terms of preparedness and adaptation—reinforce this primal need for safety with urgency of action on preparedness, but don't forget the need for polluter accountability.
3. Arson can start wildfires—that's true. **But it's a small percentage and climate change is what makes them disastrous.** (See Useful Facts section)
4. **Join the millions of Canadians** calling for serious action against climate pollution.
   - Use "millions" or "over 25 million" instead of a percentage to concretize the social norm for action. (Over 25 million = 65 per cent of Canadians who think climate change is a crisis requiring immediate action.)
5. **Wildfires will keep getting worse and worse until fossil fuel (or carbon) pollution goes to zero.**
   - Establish the mental model that climate change keeps worsening until we eliminate emissions (net-zero).
6. **Canada is not alone: The whole world needs to act and Canada is an important player.**
   - The world's rich countries need to lead the way but also to compete: A third of the world's 2023 investments in clean energy were in China.
   - We may not have a big population but Canada is a big source of fossil fuel pollution—one of the world's top climate polluters, and our emissions have not dropped as much as other G7 countries. Even the U.S. has cut back.
7. **Progress: The world is making progress on climate solutions, and so is Canada. We need to go farther, faster.**
8. **Animals, nature and people: "Wildfire burns all our homes."**
   - Don't be shy about communicating impacts on animals and nature. Human impacts are top-of-mind but Canadians express high concern about animals and nature in Re.Climate's 2024 focus groups. These are core elements of Canadian identity, across ideological differences.
9. **Address disinformation:** In anticipation of an extreme event, inoculate by sharing factual information. If communicating during an extreme event use a "truth sandwich" instead of repeating the disinformation. Lead with the truth. Then, briefly describe the disinformation. Seed doubt about its source and fact-check. Then repeat the truth.

Useful facts:

Ninety-three per cent of the area burned in Canada last year was caused by lightning. Seven per cent by human-ignition.

Note that human ignition started 40 per cent of the 6,700 fires in 2023 but they resulted in much less area burned than the 59 per cent of fires caused by lightning.

Source: Piyush Jain, Quinn E Barber, Steve Taylor, et al. Canada Under Fire – *Drivers and Impacts of the Record-Breaking 2023 Wildfire Season*. February 28, 2024). https://essopenarchive.org/doi/full/10.22541/essoar.170914412.27504349/v1

Climate change doubled extreme fire conditions last year.

Attribution science makes it possible to attribute extreme events to climate change. For example, climate change doubled the likelihood of record-breaking high temperatures, low humidity and rapid disappearance of snow cover—conditions which fueled wildfires, in Eastern Canada in 2023.

Source: World Weather Attribution, 2023. https://www.worldweatherattribution.org/climate-change-more-than-doubled-the-likelihood-of-extreme-fire-weather-conditions-in-eastern-canada/

Every heatwave in the world is now stronger and more likely to happen because of human-caused climate change.

Source: Ben Clarke and Friederike Otto, World Weather Attribution, 2023. *Reporting extreme weather and climate change: A guide for journalists*. https://www.worldweatherattribution.org/reporting-extreme-weather-and-climate-change-a-guide-for-journalists

Canada is one of the Top-10 countries for climate pollution, second in the world for per-capita emissions, and number 1 for most cumulative emissions by population in the entire world.

Source: Government of Canada, 2023. https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/environmental-indicators/global-greenhouse-gas-emissions.html

The climate crisis is a fossil fuel pollution crisis. Carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions from burning fossil fuels accounted for approximately 91 per cent of worldwide emissions in 2022.

Source: CarbonBrief, 2022. https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-global-co2-emissions-from-fossil-fuels-hit-record-high-in-2022

Experiment with these ideas and let us know how they work out for you:

- How does naming specific, local/regional events as “unnatural disasters” influence your messaging impact?
- How important are burning iconic landscapes and wildlife to Canadians’ sense of identity?
- Do images in collage work better to depict scale of fire and individual human impact?
- Is there a difference in audience response to the terms “fossil fuel pollution” over “carbon pollution”?

More Resources

Unnatural Disasters Resource Hub, Potential Energy Coalition: https://potentialenergycoalition.org/unnatural-disasters/

Potential Energy Unnatural Disasters tip sheet: https://potentialenergycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Unnatural-Disasters_Communications-Guide_vF.pdf?emci=2d1ce2c8-7a29-ef11-86d2-

6045bdd9e096&emdi=92fee6cd-d329-ef11-86d2-6045bdd9e096&ceid=10329454

Potential Energy: Talk Like a Human: https://potentialenergycoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Talk-Like-a-Human.pdf

Indigenous Perspectives: Unnatural Disasters. Canadian Climate Institute: https://climateinstitute.ca/publications/unnatural-disasters/

Wildfires in the Media: An Analysis of Canadian National Media and Wildfire Misinformation, Re.Climate, 2023: https://reclimate.ca/resource-training-hu/global-burning-report-webinar/

What do Canadians Really Think About Climate Change, Re.Climate, 2024: https://reclimate.ca/resource-training-hu/what-do-canadians-really-think-about-climate-change-in-2024/

Climate Visuals Image Gallery by Climate Outreach (international): https://climatevisuals.org/

Is Climate Change to Blame? (Video on attribution science), Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 2024: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFOTkNVMWqM

Environment Canada Can Now Rapidly Link High-Heat Weather Events to Climate Change: https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/environment-canada-climate-change-heat-wave-weather-attribution-1.7235596

World Energy Investments: International Energy Agency: https://www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-investment-2024