

# Jasper fires show public policy shouldn't be solely driven by public sentiment

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Since the horrific fire swept through Jasper National Park last week, I've been reflecting on my time in government. The fire has been devastating for those live, work or have businesses in the park, and has caused disappointment to thousands of tourists.

I don't live or do business in Jasper. However, this terrible fire caused me to think about whether governments did enough to avoid this outcome. I also think about lessons that all governments should take about public policy, effective leadership and the role of science when there is controversy.

In 1999, I was environment minister in Alberta. In the 1990s, mountain pine beetles were first discovered in a park in British Columbia. These beetles are an invasive destructive tree pest – it takes only one to kill a tree. If you drive through the interior of British Columbia, you will see large areas of dead trees with a red colour which eventually turn grey. After devastating forests in B.C. and killing more than [half](#) of the lodgepole pines, the mountain pine beetle migrated with prevailing winds into Alberta, including Jasper National Park. Forests were vulnerable to being turned into standing corpses, with the infestation ending only when all large pine trees were weakened or dead.

Unfortunately, the right thing to do appeared to many people to be overly drastic. The right thing – what forest scientists were advising – would have

been to remove huge swaths of forest through logging and prescribed fires so that the beetle could not advance and kill even larger amounts of forest.

In 1999, this was not a popular approach with the public. The idea of cutting down or burning healthy forests was unpalatable to many people, including many vocal forest supporters and environmentalists who felt that the [solution would be worse than the problem](#). So the forests were left intact, which was the first failure of public policy.

Even after a tree is killed by a mountain pine beetle, the tree can still be harvested and turned into dimensional lumber. But they weren't harvested in a timely manner. This was a second failure of public policy. The result of bad public policy is that we have created a "carbon bomb." Millions of dead trees standing as tinder in the parks, just waiting for a lightning strike, tossed cigarette or out-of-control campfire to explode and spread into healthy forests. The failure of governments three decades ago, both federal and provincial, to implement sound policy in a timely manner has directly resulted in this season's (and previous and future) wildfires in Canada, including Jasper.

For the Jasper fire, there will be predictable voices that will say it is caused by climate change. That may be a contributing factor. But if the cause of the fires were primarily climate change, we would expect diseased forests and large wildfires in Sweden and Finland – but that's not the case. These countries have less disease and fewer fires because they practice science-based forestry. A big part of today's problem could have been avoided by policy action 30 some years ago.

This is a case study that reveals that good public policy is not always popular and what is popular is not always good public policy. These lessons are important to remember, knowing that today's policy and leadership failures will become tomorrow's headlines – ones with real and sometimes avoidable consequences. We need to listen to the science and act with long-term intentions.

From my time in the Alberta Cabinet, I know that government is not perfect even when even when the intentions of elected officials and our bureaucracy are good. But we need to learn from our past experiences and strive to make better decisions in the present so that we might have a better future.

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