Living Safely in Abasand, Beacon Hill and Waterways Neighbourhoods During Fire Demolition & Remediation

Demolishing and remediating homes and buildings damaged by the wildfire may create hazards for neighbours living near these buildings. In particular, the ash and dust that remains on the damaged sites may be hazardous. The Abasand, Beacon Hill and Waterways neighbourhoods may have more ash and dust than surrounding neighbourhoods because more properties were destroyed during the wildfire.

The components of the ash will vary depending on the materials burned in the area (forest and natural debris, homes, cars, industrial buildings). 136 ash samples were collected and tested during the fire response. The results of the tests are available at: http://www.alberta.ca/environmental-monitoring-fort-mcmurray.cfm.

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo is working with demolition contractors to reduce risks from ash and demolition dust to Fort McMurray residents. Some of the safety measures are:

• fencing off burned areas;
• applying tackifer to prevent ash from blowing off damaged sites;
• requiring that demolition contractors are certified in health and safety;
• ensuring the site is kept damp at all times to reduce dust;
• controlling access into neighbourhoods;
• designating specific routes to haul debris out of neighbourhoods.

These safety measures are designed to minimize the amount of ash and demolition dust in the air throughout Fort McMurray, particularly the Abasand, Beacon Hill and Waterways neighbourhoods. However, it is still possible for some ash and demolition dust to become airborne.

Alberta Environment and Parks and Wood Buffalo Environmental Association are deploying mobile air quality monitoring stations into areas of Abasand and Beacon Hill to monitor the effectiveness of the safety measures being taken. More information about the air monitoring is available at http://environmentalmonitoring.alberta.ca/air/fort-mcmurray-air-quality-data.

If you have concerns about demolition activities, contact the Pulse Line at 780-743-7000.
Health impacts from airborne ash or demolition dust:

Exposure to large amounts of ash or demolition dust in the air could have health impacts including:

- shortness of breath, asthma attack or lung irritation;
- irregular heartbeat, chest pain or fatigue;
- headaches;
- eye, nose and throat irritation;
- persistent cough, phlegm, wheeze, scratchy throat or irritated sinuses; and
- worsening of existing heart and lung conditions.

People at a higher risk of having health impacts from airborne ash or demolition dust include:

- people with existing respiratory conditions such as lung cancer, asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), including chronic bronchitis and emphysema;
- people with existing heart conditions including angina, previous heart attack, congestive heart failure or irregular heartbeat;
- infants, and children 7 years old and younger;
- people over 65 years of age;
- pregnant women; and
- smokers, especially those who have smoked for several years.

How can you reduce you and your families’ exposure to airborne ash or demolition dust?

- RMWB requires contractors to notify you when a building adjacent to you (beside, behind and across the street) will begin demolition activities. You should also speak with the homeowner or demolition contractor of the adjacent building to find out when demolition activities could produce airborne ash or dust.
- Install a HEPA filter on air conditioners and furnaces.
- Avoid unnecessary outdoor activity close to demolition activities. This is particularly important for family members who are at a higher risk of health impacts.
- Remove any washed fabric/clothes from outdoor clothes lines. Wash any dusty clothes that were left outside separately from other household clothes, or discard them.
What can you do if you think there is ash or demolition dust in the air?
• Stay indoors.
• Close all external doors and windows.
• Turn off the ventilation intake as much as possible for air conditioners and furnaces.
You may decide to leave on extremely hot days, as your home may get very hot without fresh air from windows or air conditioning.

What can you do if you think there is ash or demolition dust on your property?
• Use a damp cloth or low pressure water hose to remove dust from outdoor surfaces.
• Install new air conditioner and furnace filters.
• Discard any foods grown above-ground or stored outdoors.
• Wear an N95 mask when first mowing your lawn.

If you feel unwell during demolition activities:
• Call Health Link at 811 or consult your family physician for any required medications or extra precautions.
• Flush your eyes thoroughly with water or your skin thoroughly with water and a gentle soap solution if you come into contact with fire retardant, soot, ash, dust or debris.
• If you have respiratory symptoms such as coughing, move away from the area, take any prescription inhalers as directed, and if you are having trouble breathing, seek medical attention promptly.

Leaving the neighbourhood during demolition activities:
If you or your family member belong to one of the high risk groups listed on Page 2 or you have a pre-existing heart or lung condition that is not stable or is severe, you may decide to leave the neighbourhood during demolition activities.
You know your health condition(s) best. Check with your health provider to make sure that you are on all required medications, and ensure that you have sufficient supply on hand.

Please note: Alberta Health Services will not be offering any air quality or soil/dust testing.